



## **Lives Turned Upside Down** by **FallingStar95**

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Family, Romance

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Jonathan B., Nancy W.

**Pairings:** Jonathan B./Nancy W.

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2018-02-07 18:19:16

**Updated:** 2018-06-01 22:46:02

**Packaged:** 2019-12-16 23:20:57

**Rating:** T

**Chapters:** 13

**Words:** 36,610

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers are no longer the two shy kids of the past trying to figure each other out. They'd grown up together, matured together, as they sorted through their demons. But when they're faced with a much different sort of challenge, the two new college grads relocate from New York to Chicago to start the next journey in their lives a bit closer to home.

## 1. New Beginnings

*This can't be happening. This can't be happening. This can't be happening.*

Nancy paced anxiously back and forth across Jonathan's small apartment, weaving her way in between the scattered moving boxes strewn across the floor. Some were already filled to the brim with his belongings and some still waited patiently to be packed for their impending move back to the Midwest. They were going back to Hawkins for just a few weeks to spend time with their families, but the two of them were ultimately bound for Chicago after his graduation taking place in a couple days. She had been living with him in New York since her own graduation last year from Indiana University, and the two had been working together to pack up the apartment's contents all day.

But when Jonathan left to get them some take-out for dinner, the 23-year-old woman raced to the bathroom with her purse, withdrawing a terrifying object she'd bought from the corner store that day.

A pregnancy test.

She'd been feeling ill for quite a while now, but she'd only started to fear the worst the previous week when she realized she had missed her period. She'd wanted to tell Jonathan for the past few days, but she didn't want to worry him since he was busy studying for finals and working on the many projects that came with the last semester of his senior year. So she'd suffered in silence until today when she received her final paycheck from her internship so that she could buy a few tests without spending the last of their budgeted grocery money.

And that's how she found herself in this position, three prepared tests lying facedown by the bathroom sink as she nervously awaited their results.

In her haste, she'd almost forgotten that Jonathan was returning with dinner, and she nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard the door open and his keys jangling as he replaced them in his pocket. She quickly kicked the bathroom door closed and sprinted back out

to the living area where he was placing a couple brown paper bags on the coffee table in front of the TV. "Hey!" he greeted her. "That Thai place you like closed early today, so I just got Chinese."

She twisted her features into what she hoped resembled a grateful smile. "That sounds great, thank you," she replied, fervently hoping that her casual tone of voice didn't sound too forced. She tried to busy herself so she was distracted from the tests sitting in the bathroom and quickly moved forward to relieve him of the last bag in his arms. However, her heart jumped into her throat once again as she felt a bottleneck shape and peered inside at its contents: an expensive-looking bottle of wine.

Jonathan noticed. "Oh yeah, I stopped by the liquor store on the way back too. You like White Zinfandel, right?"

Nancy's already-fake smile stretched even tighter. "Yeah," she replied somewhat stiffly. "That's so thoughtful of you."

"Well, we're celebrating, so..." he trailed off with a smile, stepping forward to wrap his arms around her waist. "I figured we deserved it."

She nodded, resting her hands gently against his chest as she tried to figure her way out of this. "I agree... but how about we save it for after you graduate? Then we can share with your family when they get here."

He raised his eyebrows. "I mean... sure, that's fine, I guess," he stuttered, surprised.

Nancy sighed. "I'm sorry. I just—you know I haven't been feeling very well lately," she acknowledged. "I know I'm probably just getting over a flu or something, but I don't want to push it and make myself sick before your big day."

Jonathan shrugged, apparently taking the bait. "I suppose that's fair," he agreed, giving her a quick peck on the cheek. "But I hope you're still hungry, at least. Because they gave me a *lot* of food."

She smiled. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

They sat down at the table to eat, mindlessly channel surfing while

dug in, but a few bites into her chicken lo mein, Nancy started to feel the familiar discomfort of nausea bubbling within her gut. "Oh... *fuck*," she whimpered, placing her hand over her mouth and jumping to her feet.

"Nancy?!" Jonathan exclaimed, replacing his food on the table. "Are you alright?"

Before he could follow her in, she dived into the bathroom, hurriedly locking the door behind her since the tests were still sitting on the counter. Dropping to her knees, she began to retch over the toilet, her boyfriend rapping his knuckles on the door behind her. "Nancy, c'mon. Please let me in," he pleaded from behind the wooden barrier. "I want to help."

"There's nothing you can do. Go away!" she groaned, her breath hitching as she continued to vomit. She couldn't help the tears that were now streaming in torrents down her pale face, and the sounds of her puking were now interspersed with involuntary, pained sobs.

"Wait... Nance, are you—are you crying?" he asked, his voice soft but concerned.

"I said *go AWAY*, Jonathan!" she bit out, a tinge of hostility in her voice, but the effort she put into yelling just caused her to bring up another wave of vomit. The lack of oxygen she was receiving caused her ears to ring, so much so that she didn't hear the sounds of Jonathan fiddling outside the door, worriedly attempting to pick the lock with a paper clip.

However, just as she finished being sick and flushed the remnants down the toilet, the door began to open with a loud click when he finally managed to manipulate the lock. She desperately threw herself against it as Jonathan started to push through into the bathroom. "*No!*" she exclaimed, weakly trying to brace the door with her body, even though throwing up had taken a great deal of energy out of her.

Jonathan stared at her through the small crack, his expression completely bewildered. "Nancy...why are you doing this?!" he demanded. "You're seriously starting to scare me a bit here. *What's* going on?"

"I—" she opened her mouth to make up some bullshit excuse, but she realized it just wasn't worth it anymore; he obviously already knew something was up. Her face crumpled as she began to cry, but she slowly opened the door for him, falling against his chest and hiding her face in his shoulder.

He wrapped his arms around her without a second thought, apparently not caring that she probably reeked of sweat and puke. "Hey, it's okay. I've got you," he whispered, rubbing her back soothingly as she sobbed into him. "*Please* just tell me that you're okay."

She nodded. "I-I'm okay," she assured him weakly. "But I... I'm just—"

He raised his eyebrows questioningly. "You're just what?" he prompted when she trailed off.

Nancy took a deep breath to brace herself for what came next, slightly relieved that doing so didn't cause her to vomit again. "I... missed my period, Jonathan."

His face slowly went blank, his eyes briefly darting down to her abdomen and back. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, obviously unsure what to say, so Nancy opened the door wider to reveal the tests sitting near the sink. "I haven't checked them yet, but..."

"Wait... why didn't you tell—"

She hid her face in her hands, tears filling her eyes again. "I-I didn't know for sure, and so I didn't want to stress you out while you were finishing your exams," she murmured, looking back up at his confused face when her tears began pooling in her palms. "I-I've just been t-trying so hard to k-keep it-t together, but... Jonathan, I'm so s-scared!" she sobbed.

Nancy wasn't typically a very tearful person, but she knew it broke his heart on the rare occasions he *did* see her cry. She could practically hear it splitting in two as he pulled her tightly against him once again, allowing her tears to soak the shoulder of his thin jacket. She noticed his eyes were now glistening with tears of his own, as

well, but he didn't let his own emotions stand in the way of trying to comfort her. "Shhh, it's okay. It's gonna be alright," he finally managed to choke out past the lump in his throat. "I'm not going anywhere, Nancy. We'll figure this out."

She took a few deep breaths to compose herself before pulling away from him. "I-I suppose I should, you know... check them, I guess," she stammered, her heart anxiously racing as she took a couple slow steps back toward the sink.

Jonathan followed, nodding his head as if he knew how to do nothing else. But before she could muster the courage to turn them over, he suddenly reached out and took her left hand between both of his, subconsciously pressing their matching scars together. "I love you," he said, squeezing his fingers around hers. "No matter what these say... I'm with you."

She gave him a small, watery smile. "I love you, too," she whispered, extending a shaking hand over the tests. And finally, as if she were ripping off a band-aid, she flipped them over quickly in rapid succession, one right after another, and she almost stopped breathing in the process.

All three of them displayed two pink lines: positive. *Pregnant.*

They stood in silence for a few moments before Jonathan suddenly turned tail and left the room. Nancy felt a cold wave sweep over her heart, and she had the sudden inclination to yell, to scream, to bash her fists against the ugly, patterned wallpaper. A small part of her suggested maybe her newfound hormones had something to do with the motivation behind these urges. But instead, she simply slid down the wall and buried her face against her knees, holding them to her chest as she tried not to fall apart.

However, not even a minute later, she heard soft footsteps as he re-entered the tiny bathroom. She felt his shaky, uneven breaths as he lowered himself down to her level, but she refused to look up. "I know this may not be the best place to do this..."

"It's fine," she croaked, her voice hoarse with tears still threatening to fall. "You don't have to say anything you don't mean."

His hand fell gently onto her back. "N-No, I'm not... I just had to get —" he stuttered, but he soon trailed off, letting out a long, nervous exhale. "Nancy... Can you please just look at me?"

She let out a long breath to steady herself before she finally lifted her head, but her heart nearly stopped when she faced him. He was crouched beside her holding a small, velvet box, which housed a simple yet elegant ring. He smiled at her flabbergasted expression and reached out to wipe away the remnants of tears from under her eyes.

"I've had it for a while, and I *was* going to do this right after I graduated, but... well, I think I want to do it here and now," he said, trying to keep a light tone to his voice in order to put them both more at ease. "Nancy... I love you. But even before I loved you, I *liked* you, which is definitely saying something since you know I didn't like most people in high school," he chuckled. "Ever since we were kids, you were always the smartest person in our class. That was obvious to everyone... But more importantly, you were *kind*; you respected people and demanded that same respect be shown to everyone. Do you remember when you slapped Henry Kovak in first grade after he pushed me off the jungle gym?" he recounted with a grin. "I think that must've been the first time I realized you were something special."

She choked on a laugh as she remembered back to that day herself. "H-He was asking for it," she hiccupped, holding her closed fist against her lips to keep herself from dissolving into full-blown sobs. She didn't want to interrupt this speech that he'd apparently prepared, knowing he must have spent time practicing it. She almost laughed out loud again at the mental picture of Jonathan standing in front of a mirror reciting to himself, but she held it together.

He inched a bit closer so he could cradle her face in his hand. "And then we grew up, and you only became smarter and kinder... and *braver* than anyone else I've ever met. And even though you barely knew me at first, you helped me save Will. *Twice!* And I'll *still* never be able to thank you enough," he told her, tears coming to his eyes as he recalled the day he got his little brother back from the Upside Down. "And I know we've both been through hell and back, Nance, but as much as I wish we didn't have to suffer through all of it, it brought us



together... and I'm so grateful for that."

There was no point in even trying to suppress her tears anymore. They ran freely down in face in torrents, but her heart practically did a somersault when she noticed a tear sliding down his, as well. "I'm grateful, too," she agreed, bringing her hand up to cover his own, which still rested on her cheek.

But he surprised her then, twining their fingers together and swinging their joined hands down to her abdomen. "And I'm grateful for *this*," he assured her without a hint of dishonesty. "Yeah, it is unexpected... And I know you're scared, Nance; I am, too. But we've been up against *much* scarier things before, and we've always come out okay," he reminded her. "And God, if this baby is anything like you, then they're going to be one *lucky* kid. Jeez, they're already going to be lucky enough having you for a mom," he insisted, a genuine smile quickly overtaking his face at the thought. "And I want to spend the rest of my life loving you both and trying to make you as happy as you make me."

They continue to stare deeply into each other's wet eyes for a moment, but she couldn't contain her watery laugh when Jonathan awkwardly shimmied around on the tile so that he was on one knee. He extended his hand to her, and she gladly gave him hers in return, her heart beginning to race in anticipation of what she knew was coming next. "So... Nancy Miranda Wheeler," he said, a slight quiver in his voice. "Will you marry me?"

She nodded, a wide smile overtaking her face. "Yes," she choked out, her voice thick with emotion. "Of course I will."

He grinned, slipping the ring into place on her finger, before pulling her into his arms again and cradling her head lovingly against his shoulder. "Thank you," he whispered in her ear before pulling away so their eyes met. "Nancy, I just want you to know I won't let us turn into the nuclear family from the cul-de-sac you grew up in," he assured her, referencing their conversation from so many years ago after their paths first crossed. "I *promise*... I'll never take you or your love for granted," he told her sincerely. "And I'll always do what I can to try and be the kind of man you deserve."

Nancy made a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob, but regardless, her joy could not be matched in that moment. "I know," she replied confidently, reaching out to cup her hand around his cheek. She tenderly ran her thumb across the small amount of stubble on his jaw and considered how much he had grown, how much they *both* had grown, since the days when they were just two shy kids trying to figure each other out. In a couple days, they would *both* be college graduates. They were moving to Chicago together, a big city they enjoyed that was a bit closer to home. They had managed to secure jobs there, both of them doing what they loved. And now, they were *engaged*, and in a matter of months, they would be adding a son or a daughter to their family.

Letting the reality sink in for a moment, she unconsciously moved her other hand back down to her stomach, which was still flat as of now. But even though it wasn't obvious yet, she was still growing a living part of them inside of her... it was surreal.

Jonathan's eyes followed her hand, and his smile grew a bit wider, his eyes softening. "Are you okay?" he asked gently, wiping a few more of her tears away. "With this?"

Nancy looked up at him and managed a genuine smile of her own. "Yeah," she affirmed. "I mean, I know we weren't planning on it. And I'm *definitely* still terrified, but... I think we can do this."

He nodded reassuringly, placing his hand next to hers. "Of course we can."

She twisted her wrist slightly to intertwine their fingers together, her newfound engagement ring sparkling magnificently in contrast to the harsh, fluorescent light of the dingy bathroom. She smiled at its brilliance before leaning in to press a kiss to her future husband's cheek. "I love you, Jonathan," she whispered, nuzzling her head into the crook of his neck. "I love you so much."

"I love you too," he replied, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling them both back onto their feet. They simply stood there for a few moments and held each other, both unwilling to let go, until Jonathan finally broke the silence. "How about we call it quits on packing for the day?" he suggested. "I think we both need some time

to unwind, right?"

Nancy nodded, eager to let go of their responsibilities for the rest of the night. "That sounds perfect," she agreed quietly, reaching up to wipe the last remnants of tears from her face. "I need to brush my teeth and shower first though... I'm a little bit disgusting right now," she acknowledged, wrapping her arms across her sweaty body with slight embarrassment. She still couldn't believe he'd proposed to her immediately after she'd finished vomiting.

Jonathan shook his head with an affectionate smirk, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Don't talk that way about my fiancée," he insisted teasingly, which managed to bring a happy blush to Nancy's face. "But if you really want to, then go for it. I think I'm gonna run back out quickly and pick up a few more things anyway."

She pouted for a moment, having hoped that he would join her under the warm spray, but she was hardly able to contain herself when he returned thirty minutes later with a couple cases of ginger ale ("for your stomach..."), a big bottle of prenatal vitamins ("for the baby..."), and a VHS of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* ("...and a little something for you"). She even surprised *herself* a bit when her legs propelled her towards him and jumped up to wrap around his waist, allowing her to kiss every inch of his face she could reach.

And as the two of them laid tangled together on the couch that night, laughing lightheartedly at the admittedly cheesy movie, they felt their anxieties slowly turning into something a *little* more like excitement.

---

There's much more of this story to come, so stay tuned! And as always, please leave a review, follow and favorite, let me know about your comments and suggestions, and/or message me prompts and feedback to keep my little Jancy-loving heart inspired :)

See ya real soon!

## 2. End of an Era

"Jonathan Byers, Photography and Imaging."

Nancy had never seen Joyce look more ecstatic than the moment her eldest son walked across the platform to receive his diploma from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. As the older woman dabbed tears of joy from her eyes with a handkerchief her husband had readily handed to her, Chief Hopper held his fingers within the corners of his lips and whistled louder than Nancy would have ever thought humanly possible, and Will and El stood between their parents, grinning from ear to ear and cheering with great enthusiasm.

Nancy herself opted for the quieter alternative of clapping, mostly because she didn't want to make herself sick or dizzy again by overexerting, but the widest of smiles was spread across her face as her fiancé retrieved that which he had worked so hard for. Thinking back to her own graduation last year and the immense pride and relief she had felt that day, she could only imagine the bliss that Jonathan had to be feeling right now as his family screamed his praises for the rest of the audience to hear.

As the noisy group continued to hoot, Nancy noticed a bright crimson blush rush to Jonathan's face, but he was grinning nonetheless as he departed the stage and glanced up at his throng of supporters. However, since his last name was near the beginning of the alphabet, it seemed like an eternity before the rest of the graduates from the School of Arts had been recognized. But they immediately perked up as the Dean finally announced:

"I present to you, the graduates of the class of 1991!"

A roar rang through the arena, and graduation caps flew in every direction as the graduates sprang to their feet and celebrated their newfound freedom. Through the flurry of excitement, Nancy lost sight of Jonathan in the 'B' section for a few seconds, but as the tassled hats returned to their awaiting owners below, she found him already trying to escape the crowd, almost tripping over robes in the process. She couldn't help but laugh affectionately; although New York had helped him come out of his shell somewhat since high

school, Jonathan was definitely still not a fan of large seas of people.

Joyce seemed to notice, as well. "Oh, c'mon, let's hurry and beat the crowd outside! I want to see my boy!" she exclaimed, awkwardly beckoning her family out of the aisle and pointing them in the direction of the nearest exit. They'd already agreed to meet up afterwards by the archway in Washington Square Park, which was located very close to the College of Arts and Sciences, and as promised, they found Jonathan leaning against the stone fixture with a serene smile on his lips. However, his face split into a much bigger grin as soon as he saw them approaching, and Joyce was the first to embrace him.

"There he is! Oh, Jonathan, I'm so proud of you," she sang, pulling him into her arms as if he was still the little six-year-old who dreamed of making something of himself in New York City. "I always knew we'd be here someday!"

"You did it, kid," Hopper praised him, clapping a proud hand on his shoulder and somehow managing to pull his stepson away from Joyce for a brief one-armed hug. "Way to go!"

Will and El reached him next, basically at the same time, and hugged him with so much ferocity that he nearly fell over, but he managed to remain upright and absorb the blows from both of the teenagers, holding one in each arm. Neither of them said a word, but honestly, they didn't have to. Their embrace said enough as it was.

And even though both of them were reluctant to let go, Nancy stepped forward and eagerly took his face between her hands, kissing him with as much fervor she felt comfortable displaying in front of his family. "Congratulations, Jon," she said with a smile, leaning her forehead against his.

"Thank you," he replied, leaning in to kiss her nose. "I couldn't have done it without you."

Nancy scoffed, shaking her head at him. "Shut up, of course you could have!" she insisted with a roll of her eyes. "But I'm glad you let me tag along for the ride anyway."

"If you say so," he retorted teasingly, lightly brushing his thumb across the furrowed crease of her forehead as she playfully pretended to be cross with him.

Joyce could barely hold herself back from that point onward, and she approached her son again, beaming. "She's right though, sweetie. This was all you," she assured him, reaching up to straighten the graduation cap that had begun to fall to the side of his head. "You worked *so hard* to follow your dream out here, and now, it's finally come true! I'm just so happy you still made it here, even after everything that's happened..." she trailed off, tears springing to her eyes once again. She didn't have to elaborate, knowing that everyone there obviously understood the hardships that might've prevented him from taking this shot, whether they were mere finances or the invasion of a paranormal entity. "You deserve this, Jonathan. More than anyone."

Now it was Jonathan's turn to become teary-eyed. "Mom..." he began to say, but he couldn't find the proper words to adequately express how grateful he was for her. He instead settled on wrapping her in a fierce hug, which Joyce was only too happy to return.

"I love you, baby," she whispered, kissing his cheek.

"I love you too, Mom," he murmured into her shoulder. "Thank you for everything."

She didn't know how it happened, but she soon found her thoughts trailing off to imagine her own child as she watched her future mother-in-law embrace her son. She could only hope that someday she and Jonathan would be just as close to their child as he was with his own mother.

"Nancy, sweetie, are you okay?"

She jumped when Joyce suddenly appeared in front of her, touching a concerned hand to her shoulder.

"Wha-What...? I—Yeah, I'm fine," she stammered, trying her best to nod in a nonchalant manner. "Why?"

"You just looked a million miles away, that's all."

Nancy shrugged her shoulders. "Just thinking about the future, I guess," she explained, sharing a knowing look with Jonathan. He smiled lovingly back at her and raised his eyebrows, silently asking her if she was ready to break the news. She nodded back at him encouragingly, discreetly reaching her hand into her pocket where her engagement ring rested.

Joyce looked between them with a confused look. "What is it? What are you two so happy about—" she questioned, but she abruptly stopped when Nancy unearthed her left hand from her pocket, the ring now glittering conspicuously on her finger.

There was a collective gasp from Joyce, Will, and El while Hopper looked on with a grin on his face. Unsurprisingly, Jonathan and Nancy were quickly pulled into an almost bone-crushing hug from the Hopper-Byers matriarch. "Oh, this is wonderful!" she squealed, pressing a kiss to both of their heads.

As soon as she released them, Will tackled his brother in a firm hug while El embraced Nancy and took her hand to admire the ring. "Pretty!" she exclaimed, turning to look at her stepbrother. "For once, he has some decent fashion sense," she teased good-naturedly, sticking her tongue out at him.

"Oh, shut up," Jonathan chuckled, releasing Will so that his stepsister could hug him too.

Will grinned, shaking his head amusedly at the pair of them before making his way over to his future sister-in-law. "Congratulations, Nancy," he told her, giving her a quick hug. "So, when's the wedding going to be?"

Nancy swallowed, taking a deep breath to steady herself before answering. "Well... we're going to put it off for a little while, at least," she started with a shy smile.

"How long do you suppose that'll be?" Joyce asked, obviously excited by the prospect of wedding planning.

They were both quiet for a few moments until Nancy mustered up the courage to speak. "Until we have a ring bearer..."

Jonathan couldn't help but smirk at that. "Or a flower girl..." he added, a slight blush coming to his cheeks at how incredibly cheesy it was.

There was an awkward silence while everyone tried to figure out exactly what the couple was implying... but as soon as Joyce registered their meaning, her hands flew to her mouth. "Oh—Oh my...!" she squeaked, her eyes flying to Nancy. "Are you... Are you really—"

Nancy nodded and was swept into yet another hug. "Oh my goodness, I just can't believe it!" Joyce cried, happy tears gathering in the corners of her eyes.

However, Nancy noticed over her shoulder that El still looked properly confused. "What's happening?" she whispered to a grinning Will, who leaned over to whisper a quick explanation in her ear. The girl's jaw instantly dropped. "You're *pregnant?!'*"

Jonathan nodded hesitantly. "Yeah... we found out a few days ago," he replied sheepishly before his mother let go of Nancy to embrace him. "Mom, are you okay?"

Joyce nodded furiously into his shoulder. "My baby's having a baby!" she cried, sniffing back tears. "As long as *you're* both happy, then I'm happy."

Nancy smiled, walking over to join her fiancé once Joyce released her vice grip on him. He wrapped his arm around her and she leaned into his side, immediately comforted by his warm, reassuring presence. "We are," she assured the grandmother-to-be. "Although... it was kind of a shock, at first. I wasn't entirely sure if we were going to be ready for something like this," she acknowledged, biting down nervously on her bottom lip.

"Kid, no one's ever *really* ready," Hopper rationalized from where he stood behind his daughter. "But you'll learn as you go. Being a parent is something you just *do*... And I have a pretty good feeling you two are gonna do just fine."



Jonathan smiled at the man he'd grown to love as his dad. "Thanks, Hop," he replied. He knew his stepfather's often gruff exterior hid a wise and intelligent soul, and he was genuinely grateful to have him as a part of his family. The man had made his mother so happy, and he was more of a father to him and Will than Lonnie Byers ever was or ever had the potential to be.

The chief of police nodded, a small smile on his face. "So... when exactly should we expect this munchkin to show up?"

Nancy had to stifle a laugh at his choice wording. "Well, I saw a doctor yesterday, and her estimate was that I'll be due sometime in early January," she answered. "But we're being transferred to an obstetrician in Chicago in a couple weeks, and we'll be able to get a better idea once I'm a bit further along."

El looked like she could hardly contain herself. "I'm so excited," she stage-whispered to Will. "We're gonna have a niece!"

"Or nephew," Will reminded her with a smirk. "I bet you 10 bucks it's a boy!"

El grinned. "I'll take that deal," she agreed enthusiastically, shaking her stepbrother's hand.

The two of them continued to poke fun at each other while Joyce expressed how thrilled she was that she would have another baby in the family to spoil. And as his family continued to excitedly chatter over one another on the walk back to Jonathan's apartment, Nancy couldn't help but grin in spite of all the commotion.

Their baby was going to be *so* loved.

### 3. Hold Me Tight

Jonathan had never been a particularly light sleeper, but over the last few years, he'd become quite finely attuned to the sounds Nancy made whenever she was having a nightmare, and these were what tended to wake him up faster than anything.

However, that was *before* she was pregnant.

Her first real nightmare *during* her pregnancy woke him up before she even had a chance to make a sound; instead, her foot extended outward unexpectedly and made solid contact with his ribs. He yelped as the the wind was swiftly knocked out of him and curled into himself in an attempt to regain his breath, but this only caused him to roll out of bed onto the floor of his childhood bedroom.

He quickly stood up, rubbing at his side, as she continued to lash out in her sleep, her fit now accompanied by scared whimpers and moans. Judging by her terrified expression, she seemed to be fighting against some invisible force that threatened to harm her within the confines of her dream. Most of what came out of her mouth was unintelligible, but he managed to pick up on a few key words in the midst of her tirade. "No... help... baby... *my baby*... please, no."

He could practically feel his heart splitting in two as he climbed back onto the bed and tried to find a place he could hold her without getting kicked again, perhaps in an even more painful place than the first time. After a fair bit of struggle, he managed to slip his hand under her arm and across her back, attempting to pull her gently towards him. "Nancy, wake up..." he murmured softly, not wanting to startle her too badly.

"**NO!**" she screamed, ten times louder than before. She continued to struggle, beating her arms limply against his chest and accidentally ramming the top of her skull against his chin.

He winced, but wasted no time in flicking on the light and gathering her towards him again. This time, he pulled her upright, hoping that the movement would help her to regain some clarity. "Nancy, wake up!" he said again, a bit firmer this time. "It's just a dream."

She struggled for a few moments more before awakening with a loud gasp. "Wh-What?" she stammered, her eyes darting frantically around the room. "Jonathan...?"

He nodded, reaching out to brush her bedraggled curls out of her face. "Yeah, I'm here," he assured her quietly, leaning in to kiss her sweaty brow. "You just had a nightmare, that's all."

Although they didn't plague them nearly as often as they did a few years back, bad dreams weren't necessarily uncommon for either of them, and as a result, they had both become pretty good at calming the other down in the aftermath of having one. Usually, they'd just acknowledge it, maybe agree to talk about it in the morning, and go back to sleep wrapped in each other's arms. But even though he knew firsthand how terrifying they could be, he definitely wasn't expecting his fearless fiancée to burst into tears.

But that's exactly what she did.

He was shocked for a moment as she began to sob, but he quickly shook it off and pulled her into his lap. "Hey, it's okay. It's over, Nance," he gently assured her, tucking her head under his chin. "Shhh... you're here with me. You're safe, I've got you."

He heard the door open just barely as he cradled her and looked over to see Will's face peeking through the crack. *You okay?* his younger brother mouthed, his eyes darting briefly to Nancy.

Jonathan nodded infinitesimally, trying not to alert her to his brother's presence. *Bad dream*, he mouthed back.

Will nodded in understanding, having initially gone through the worst nightmares himself a few years ago. But Jonathan had been there for him then and gotten him through the night even when he was feeling uncontrollably panicked. He knew his brother would be able to do the same for Nancy now. Regardless, the younger Byers brother closed the door quietly and headed to the kitchen to boil water for some herbal tea, just as his mother did for him and Eleven; it helped.

Meanwhile, Jonathan continued to whisper sweet nothings in Nancy's

ear, rubbing his hand in gentle circles across her back. "It's alright, Nancy. You're safe," he repeated, kissing the top of her head. "It was just a bad dream."

At his words, Nancy's grip only tightened around him, her tears seeping into the fabric of the old t-shirt he was wearing. "B-But it-t felt so r-real..." she whimpered, laying her cheek against his chest. "The b-bad men, Jonathan... Th-they came b-back!"

He felt a shiver run down his spine at the mention of Brenner and his cronies, but he set his jaw and tried to keep a straight face for her sake. "They're not coming back, I promise," he told her, slowly rocking them back and forth. "The lab's gone, Brenner's dead... and apparently, most of the others got taken out a long time ago," he reminded her, recalling what his stepsister had told him about Kali and her gang.

Nancy became silent in his arms for a moment, absorbing his words and trying to regulate her breathing. Jonathan nodded, taking her face delicately between his hands so she met his gaze. "That's it... in and out," he encouraged her, filling and emptying his lungs in sync with her until she was calm.

Now that she was still, it broke his heart to see her so weary. Her eyes were red and swollen, snot dripping from her nose and her lip trembling with nerves as she struggled to recover from her anxious episode. He reached across to his bedside table and grabbed a box of Kleenex, taking a couple in his hand and gently wiping her face clean of tears and mucus.

"I'm sorry," he heard her whisper as he tossed the tissues into a wastebasket.

He shook his head. "Nothing to be sorry for," he assured her, touching his hand to her ruddy cheek.

Nancy sighed, looking down at her lap. "My mom once told me that you have really weird dreams when you're pregnant, because of all the extra hormones and stuff... but, that—that was *horrible*."

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked, setting a comforting hand

on her knee.

She hesitated for a moment before looking back at him with a heavy sigh. "They wanted our baby..." she croaked, squeezing her eyes shut as more tears threatened to spill over. "For some reason, they knew it was us who took down the lab, and... I think they wanted revenge for that," she explained. "I was way further along, showing and everything, and... and they gave me something so I couldn't move. But I could still see and hear *everything* they were doing, and... they ripped it out of me, Jonathan. Just like they took El from *her* mom!" she whimpered, burying her face in her hands. "And It was so tiny and underdeveloped, and it could hardly breathe on its own, and—and—"

Before she could continue, he pulled her against his chest and instinctively rested his hand on her barely rounded tummy. He'd heard enough to know that she was understandably shaken. He felt sick just hearing her tell him about it; he couldn't imagine what it must have been like to experience it as vividly as she had.

"Nothing's ever going to hurt you *or* the baby," he promised her. "I'd never let anything happen to either of you."

He felt her exhale shakily against the crook of his neck. "I know," she managed. "It was just *so scary*... I really felt like it was actually happening."

He nodded in understanding, lightly moving his hand across her abdomen. "Don't worry, okay? Nothing's going to touch him until the moment he's in our arms."

He felt Nancy's lips twitch upward into a small smile against his shoulder. "How are you so sure it's a boy, huh?" she teased him softly.

He smiled too, his heart lifting at the sound of her quiet laugh. "Um, well, I'm not. I don't really know... force of habit, I guess," he replied. "The only baby I've ever really been around was Will."

"What about me?" Will's voice sounded from outside the door, causing Nancy to jump a little bit, but as soon as she realized who it was, she couldn't help but laugh again.

"Hi, Will," she greeted him quietly, wiping the remaining moisture from her face as he cautiously peeked in through the door.

"Hey, Nancy," he replied, slowly entering the room while balancing a cup on a small saucer. "I, uh, heard what was going on and made you some tea," he explained, slowly setting the steaming chamomile down on Jonathan's desk. "It always helps me and El... with bad dreams and stuff."

With the tea delivered, the teenager turned around to leave the couple alone once again, but Nancy flew off the bed and enveloped him in a hug before he could get to the door. "Thank you, Will," she said gratefully. "Really, you're the best."

Jonathan smiled, genuinely touched by his brother's thoughtfulness. "What she said," he added in agreement, grinning at Will over Nancy's shoulder.

The teenager smiled back. "It's no problem," he insisted before a small yawn escaped him. "Well, I'm going back to bed," he said, patting Nancy on the back before letting go of her. "But if you ever, ya know, want to talk about anything... I'm here, okay?"

Nancy smiled affectionately at him. "Thanks, Will," she replied. "Goodnight."

As the younger boy left the room, Nancy picked up the cooling cup of tea and brought it back with her to bed, taking a gulp and setting it on Jonathan's nearby dresser before cuddling back up to him. "Have I ever mentioned how much I love your family?"

He smirked, wrapping his arm around her waist. "Maybe once or twice," he replied teasingly, earning him a solid poke in the side. He laughed, mostly because she'd tickled him, but suddenly she was laughing too, and it was like music to his ears after seeing her so upset.

"I guess it's a good thing my family loves you too," he added, pulling her snuggly against him as they began to doze off once again.

## 4. Mom Material

"What do you want it to be?"

Jonathan turned his head to glance over at Nancy in the passenger seat. It was a crisp Friday afternoon in the middle of Chicago's blustery autumn, and they were headed to her second trimester ultrasound appointment. Her right hand rested on the swell of her belly, the fingers of her left tapping out a nervous rhythm on her leg as they sped down the city highway. "What was that?"

"Do you want a boy or a girl?" she elaborated, looking up from her midsection to glance over at him. "We might be able to find out today, you know."

He'd completely forgotten about that. They'd been so busy with moving and starting both of their new jobs that he'd almost lost track of time. But she *was* at 18 weeks, he supposed... with any luck, maybe they *could* find out the sex today.

After a moment, he settled on shrugging his shoulders. "I don't know... I guess I haven't really thought about it that much," he answered. At her slightly disappointed look, he quickly jumped to rephrase his words. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I'd be happy with either!" he assured her, plucking her left hand from her leg and holding it in his own. "I just don't think I'd prefer one over the other, that's all."

Nancy nodded, her face contemplative. "I thought maybe *I'd* have stronger feelings at this point, but I don't," she mused, chewing softly on her bottom lip. "Do you think that's weird? That I don't have this 'mother's intuition' that everyone always talks about..."

Jonathan shook his head. "I don't think it's weird," he replied, pulling their entwined fingers up to his lips so he could kiss her hand reassuringly. "Honestly, it's probably just an old wives' tales."

However, he didn't think she looked very convinced as they pulled into the parking lot at the clinic. "My mom said she just *knew* with all three of us. Why is that?" she wondered aloud. "How could she know

and I *don't*?"

Jonathan pulled into the first open spot he saw, put the car in park, and immediately turned to face her. "Nancy, I don't care what did or didn't happen when your mom was pregnant. Because you're not her," he explained. "You're Nancy Wheeler, you're having *our* baby, and that's all I could ever ask for."

Nancy nodded her head and gave him a small smile, but it worried him that it didn't seem to reach her eyes. "Did something happen?" he asked delicately. "Was it something I said or did?"

Her eyes widened and she shook her head furiously. "No! No no no, of course not, Jonathan," she insisted, reaching over to touch his face. "No, it's nothing *you* did. You've been wonderful with all this. It's just..." she struggled to find the right words to explain what she was feeling. "Lately, some of the other women at work make me feel like I'm not... doing enough."

Jonathan blinked a few times, trying to process what she was saying. "I'm confused," he finally stated. "Doing enough of what? Your work?"

"No, the opposite," Nancy sighed. "I'm the only *female* main news reporter, but it's almost like they don't see that as an accomplishment. Whenever any of them talk to me, it's never about my work and the articles I'm writing. It's always about how I've been feeling, what parenting books I'm reading, whether or not I've gone to Lamaze classes... and then when I tell them I've been too busy with my assignments to really think about a lot of that, they tell me I'm not 'engaging' enough with my pregnancy, that I'm not paying enough attention to my 'maternal instincts' or whatever," she explained, gritting her teeth with subtle frustration. "And the rest of the other reporters in *my* department don't take me seriously *because* I'm pregnant, which *obviously* means I'm going to be an unreasonable, hormonal mess," she spat sarcastically. "And I know it's all really misogynistic and I shouldn't even be listening to any of them in the first place. But at the same time, it makes me feel like..." she trailed off, looking down at her lap with a mixture of embarrassment and shame. "Maybe I'm just not 'mom material,' I guess."

Jonathan absorbed her words for a moment until he noticed her eyes



starting to get a little wet. Overcome with the need to comfort her, he opened his door and made his way over to her side so the middle console wouldn't be separating them. He slid in under her, regardless of the tight fit, and pulled her carefully onto his lap, gently cradling her head against his chest as she began to sniffle back tears. He simply held her for a moment, rubbing his hand up and down her back, before he finally spoke. "I'm sorry they're making you feel like this," he murmured softly, moving his fingers to trail lightly through her brown curls. "But you know that's all *bullshit*, right?"

Nancy snorted at his use of her favorite curse word. She looked up at him with a small smile, but she didn't respond, almost as if she couldn't quite bring herself to agree. So when she didn't speak, Jonathan took that as his cue to continue. "We're barely halfway through nine months. There's still plenty of time to 'engage' or whatever the hell they called it," he assured her, lightly resting his hand on her bump to illustrate his point. "And you should *never* be ashamed of being busy with work. You're a great reporter; you got hired at the *Sun-Times* right out of college, for Christ's sake! And if they don't acknowledge your talent enough, then that's really their loss."

She nodded her head as he wiped a stray tear from the corner of her eye. "And you're going to be an incredible mom, Nance. Don't ever let anyone make you doubt that," he told her firmly. "Those idiots are making it seem like you have to choose between having a family or a career, and you're right, it is really shitty and misogynistic of them," he acknowledged. "But that's just going to make it even more satisfying when you prove all of them wrong."

He'd barely finished speaking when Nancy pressed a kiss to his lips, smiling as she pulled away and leaned her forehead against his. "How is it you always know *exactly* what to say?"

He shrugged his shoulders playfully. "It's easy when all you have to do is tell the truth."

She laughed as she wiped the last of her tears away. "Very smooth," she remarked, kissing the bridge of his nose, before her expression sobered back to a soft smile once again. "Thank you for believing in me," she whispered, leaning her head down onto his shoulder.

"Always," he replied, wrapping his arms a little tighter around her. He held her for a while longer before glancing at his watch and pulling her chin up to face him. "As much as I'd love to stay here with you, I think we're going to be late if we don't get out of this car pretty soon."

It was almost as if she'd forgotten momentarily where they were. As soon as he brought her appointment back to the forefront of her mind, her eyes lit up with genuine excitement, and in mere seconds, she was out of his lap and pulling her purse back on. She grabbed his hand to pull him to his feet, and he barely had time to lock the car before she was dragging him towards the entrance of the clinic, excitedly chanting, "Let's go see our baby!"

He grinned. Contrary to her previous worries, he thought she could *definitely* be considered 'mom material.'

Nancy spent the majority of the drive home looking at the photos they'd been given following the ultrasound. Somehow, she found herself unable to fathom how something so new, tiny enough to fit inside of her, could possibly look so *human* already. Jonathan had already warned her not to touch the newly developed film too much in case it could smear, but it was getting increasingly hard to resist tracing the contours of her baby's face with her finger, locating a nose and a pair of lips along the side profile. Further down the line, there were also shots pointing out fully-formed hands and feet. In one of them, the left hand was held up close to the mouth, and the technician had said it was quite possible that the baby was sucking on its thumb. Just the thought of it made Nancy's heart warm.

As soon as they arrived back at their apartment, Jonathan had already retrieved his camera from their bedroom before she'd even had a chance to take off her shoes. "I need a photo to send back home," he insisted with a cute grin.

Nancy wasn't surprised. As she grew, he'd been taking dozens of pictures of her. To tell the honest truth, she sometimes even found it a bit *too* much, particularly on days when she wasn't feeling at her best. But today, she completely understood his enthusiasm. Nothing could put a damper on her mood.

"How do you want me?" she asked, taking off her windbreaker so that her bump was on full display.

He stepped forward and took her left hand, placing it just underneath the swell of her belly. But before he positioned her right one, he grabbed one of the ultrasound photos she'd set next to her purse on the coffee table and handed it to her. "Hold it right in front of... there, that's perfect!" he exclaimed excitedly as she held the black-and-white square of film at the level of her belly button.

He snapped off a few shots from different angles before replacing the Pentax back in his camera bag. "Beautiful," he said with a smile, wrapping his arms around her waist. But Nancy didn't give him the opportunity to hold her for very long before she insisted on calling home to tell them the news.

The phone didn't ring for very long before a familiar girlish voice picked up at the Byers' home. "Hello?"

"Hi! El, is that you?" Nancy asked, surprised to hear her voice, given that she and Mike had recently relocated to West Lafayette for the freshman year at Purdue.

"Nancy! It's so good to hear your voice," the girl exclaimed. "Yeah, Mike and I just came home for the weekend. How'd your appointment go?"

"It went great," Nancy told her. "Is anyone else around?"

"Well, Mike's at your parents' house right now. Will's home, but he was up all night working on his college applications, so I think he's napping," she replied.

Jonathan seemed to catch that bit and chuckled to himself. "Well, whenever he wakes up..." he called out. "Tell him he owes you \$10!"

"Hi, Jonathan!" she laughed upon hearing her stepbrother's voice, but as soon as she took a moment to absorb his words, they heard her gasp with sudden realization. "Oh my gosh, did you find out... are you—"

Nancy giggled. "Yeah, we're having a girl!" she revealed, and she and

Jonathan were both fairly sure all of Hawkins probably heard the girl's resulting scream of delight.

It was safe to say Will wouldn't be finishing his nap anytime soon.

## 5. Sweet Surprises

*'Divide mixture into four different bowls...'*

"Why four?!" Nancy puzzled quietly as she looked over the recipe Joyce had lent her. It was Jonathan's 24th birthday the next day, and she was dead set on making a strawberry cheesecake since she knew it was his favorite dessert. However, as she whisked a dash of lemon zest into the batter she was mixing, she couldn't help but wonder if her creation would even come close to the ones that Joyce had whipped up through the years. The older woman was undoubtedly more practiced while Nancy was admittedly a bit of a culinary novice herself.

Shaking her head, she hoped the recipe would make more sense later on and began to do as her copied-down notes instructed, taking four smaller bowls out of the cupboard and setting them across the counter. She'd have to hide them in the fridge for a bit until Jonathan left to photograph a charity gala for work that evening since she hadn't had a chance to prepare a graham cracker crust yet anyway. She didn't want to do that part until he was gone because she knew he'd hear the sound of the rolling pin sliding across the table, and she wanted her creation to be a surprise. He cooked for the both of them all the time, even taking her weird pregnancy cravings into account lately, and she wanted to return the favor as best as she could.

However, as she was portioning out the sweet substance, she suddenly felt something strange. It was like a rippling sensation across her middle that slowly began to inch its way around to her side. The only thing she could compare it to was the feeling of having a spider crawl across her skin, and she jumped in surprise, letting out an involuntary cry at the thought of some insect having found its way into her shirt. Her hands flew to her waist, frantically trying to brush off whatever was on her, but she accidentally sent all four bowls careening onto the floor in the process. There was an almighty sound as they hit the floor almost simultaneously, and the vast majority of her batter splattered around the small kitchen area. She stomped her foot in frustration, cursing loudly as she looked down to find herself covered head to toe in the sticky concoction. But her agitation only

grew when she realized she'd failed to find whatever it was that had scared her so badly.

She huffed and bent down to pick up the bowls, but she yelped as the same sensation happened again in a slightly different spot closer to her navel. Her hands flew to her middle again, but when her fingers found nothing but the fabric of her shirt, her eyes widened. The feeling was coming from *inside* her.

It finally hit her; her baby was kicking... well, maybe not actually *kicking* yet, but she was still *there*! Alive and real and growing bigger every day.

She could feel her eyes growing wet as she gently moved her hand around the area where she'd felt the flutters. "Oh my gosh... hi baby," she said with a smile, moving her hand around on her bump. "How did I not know that was *you*?" she laughed, mentally berating herself for not figuring it out quicker.

She was still poking and prodding at her belly when she heard familiar footsteps running down the hall. "Nancy?! I heard a crash! Are you alright?" Jonathan demanded in one breath as he reached the kitchen, a worried expression on his face. However, when she looked up to acknowledge him, she momentarily forgot about what had just happened in her body and began to laugh raucously.

Apparently, her fiancé had been taking a pre-work shower when he'd heard all of her ingredients clatter to the ground. He just had a towel held haphazardly around his waist, and he was still dripping wet and a bit soapy. When he realized she wasn't injured in the slightest, he began to blush, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth as he realized he'd overreacted. "I thought... maybe you fell or something," he explained sheepishly, swallowing down the panicked lump in his throat.

She shook her head, wiping tears from her eyes as she struggled to get a grip and stop laughing enough to speak. "No. No, I'm fine," she sighed when she finally managed to stop giggling. "I just accidentally dropped *everything* I was working on."

He raised an eyebrow, taking in her messy clothes and the mixture

oozing across the tile. "I can see that," he chuckled, the tension slowly leaving his shoulders. "So... you're okay then?"

She nodded, carefully stepping closer to him over the mess. "Yeah, Jon, I'm okay. Better than okay," she told him excitedly. "I just felt the baby move!"

His eyes widened in surprise. "Really?" he asked. "Like she was kicking, or...?"

"I don't know if it was an actual *kick*," she told him. "But she was definitely stretching or... something. I don't know exactly, but it scared the living hell out of me!"

He snorted with laughter, a smirk spreading across his face. "Hence the mess?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, lightly smacking his arm in mock anger. "Shut up, asshole! I wasn't expecting it to happen."

He continued to snicker a moment longer as he secured the towel better around his hips before lifting his hands up to her middle. "So where'd you feel it?"

"Right... here," she told him, moving his hands so that they covered the area slightly to the right of her belly button. "It was just so *weird*, Jonathan. It almost felt like—"

But she stopped talking abruptly when she felt it happen again. She quickly adjusted his grip so that it was right above the spot where their daughter was moving. "There! Can you feel that?"

"Yeah!" he exclaimed, his resulting grin taking up nearly his entire face, and he lowered himself down onto his knees so he could be closer. "Nance, that's—wow, that's incredible," he said in an awestruck voice.

His enthusiasm was adorable, and her love for him only grew when he leaned forward to plant a kiss where he'd felt the baby's movement. She laid her hand on his head, lovingly running her fingers through his damp strands of hair, still flecked with bits of shampoo. "Have I told you lately that you're going to be an amazing

dad?" she asked, tears pricking the back of her eyes as she pictured Jonathan cradling their daughter in his arms.

He smiled, looking back up at her. "Well, you're going to be the *best* mom," he replied, standing to his feet. "So I think we'll make a pretty good team."

Nancy wrapped her arms around his narrow waist, her swollen tummy lightly pressing up against his own flat one. "We're *already* a pretty good team, don't you think?"

Jonathan grinned. "You got me there," he agreed, leaning in to kiss her.

A shudder ran through Nancy's body like electricity as his fingers found their way into her curls, and she eagerly returned the favor, bringing her hand up to play with the short hair at the nape of his neck. Her other hand landed against his bare torso, and she could feel the vibrations from a satisfied humming that came from deep within his chest, which she returned with a happy sound of her own against his lips. If possible, she felt like she'd only become *more* physically attracted to him since she'd gotten pregnant, and she'd already thought he was pretty handsome before. It just went to show that her new onslaught of hormonal changes had been a *powerful* force of nature.

Eventually, the two of them broke apart, but their faces remained close together, their foreheads touching. Jonathan's dark eyes seemed to search hers as his lips formed their signature crooked smile. "You know, I should probably go finish that shower before it gets too late..." he hinted, lifting his hand to play with one of her cheesecake-coated curls. "And now you could probably use one too."

She laughed. "What about the mess?"

He shook his head with a little shrug. "I think it can wait for a *little* while," he insisted, playfully dragging his finger through the mixture splattered on her arm before popping it in his mouth. "Mmm... were you making cheesecake, Nance?"

She nodded, grabbing his arm and leading him back down the hall.



"Mm-hmm, for your birthday," she explained in a rush, more concerned with stripping off her clothes as they reached the bathroom, where his shower was still running. "I'll probably try again tonight while you're working, but for now, you can help get *this* batter off of me," she suggested, curling her finger suggestively towards him. "Maybe *before* we get in the shower?"

He licked his lips with a cheeky grin. "Nancy Wheeler, I like the way you think," he replied before taking advantage of her kind offer.

*Happy birthday to him, indeed.*

## 6. Cuddles and Confessions

To put it simply, Jonathan was *tired*.

He'd spent the whole morning driving back to Hawkins so they could spend Christmas with their families, and upon arriving home, he found himself thrown into the chaos of a surprise baby shower that both of their mothers had orchestrated for Nancy. Although it was sweet of them, he'd admit, it definitely would have been nice to have some warning. He quickly became the designated 'runner' for the event, his mother frequently sending him on missions to grab more materials for games or prepare more food for the snack table when they ran out. He was happy to help out, of course, but he'd really been looking forward to a nap.

It brought a smile to his face to see Nancy so happy though. He knew she was tired too; being eight months pregnant wasn't exactly relaxing. She'd been having a lot of trouble sleeping lately and often woke up in the middle of the night due to the baby kicking her, having to pee, or just because she rolled over wrong and it made her back hurt. So it warmed his heart to see her so genuinely excited as she opened her presents and gushed over all the toys and onesies she received for their daughter. As always, his mother had truly outdone herself.

However, once the shower had ended, Jonathan was genuinely surprised to see another visitor pull up to the house: Steve Harrington. And in his Hawkins Police cruiser, no less!

Nancy was in the bathroom, so Jonathan pulled on his coat and trekked the short distance through the snow to meet him. "Steve? Hey!"

"BYERS!" the man greeted him, clapping him on the back. "How'd it go, man?"

Jonathan raised an eyebrow inquisitively. "Are you referring to the nightmare drive through holiday traffic or the unsuspected baby shower?"

Steve shrugged. "I mean, I was talking about the shower thing, but either, I guess?" he replied. "Hop told me it's all your mom's been talking about for like a month."

Jonathan resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "That really doesn't surprise me at all."

"Eh, I figured not," Steve chuckled. "But hey, I came over because I figured you could use a drink after all that madness. You in?"

Jonathan eyed the squad car. "Are you even allowed to drink when you're on duty?"

Steve grinned. "No, so it's a good thing my patrol just ended, huh?"

Jonathan smirked. Steve may have assumed the responsible role of Deputy in the time since he'd graduated high school, but he definitely hadn't changed *too* much.

"Well, even if I did go, I'd have to let Nancy know I'm leaving anyway," he supposed, beckoning the other man towards the door. "C'mon, get inside. It's *freezing*!"

By the time they came back inside the entryway, Nancy was reclined on the couch flipping through one of the picture books El had gotten for her to read to the baby. However, her interest in *Grandpa Bunny* quickly depleted when she saw who her fiancé had brought inside with him. "Steve?!"

"Hey, Nancy," he greeted her with a wave. "Holy shit, you're *huge*!"

She laughed, heaving herself off the couch. "Well, what else were you expecting?" she asked teasingly, waddling over to give him a slightly awkward hug. "What are you doing here?"

"If it's alright by you, I'm taking your baby daddy out to the bar for a bit," Steve answered, smirking when the title made Jonathan cringe. "Figured he could use a beer or two before you... ya know... pop."

Nancy rolled her eyes but smiled despite herself. "Sounds like fun!"

Jonathan wasn't so sure he agreed with her definition of 'fun.' He'd

never been much of a bargoer in New York, much preferring to stay inside with Nancy, a pizza, and a bottle of wine. But Steve was trying to do something nice for him, and he'd feel bad turning him down, so...

"Yeah. Really fun," he agreed with a slightly forced smile.

Thirty minutes later, the two men were each nursing a drink in front of the sticky counter at Hal's, one of two bars in Hawkins. And although the other one was admittedly loads nicer, the one and only Billy Hargrove had picked up a job bartending there. So the uncomfortable stools at Hal's would have to do. However, it was far less crowded, although Jonathan wasn't quite sure if that was comforting or if it just made the situation far more awkward for him.

"So," Steve said, throwing back a gulp of his IPA. "How's Chicago been treating you?"

"Fine," Jonathan replied after swallowing a sip of his Strongbow cider. He'd never really been fond of beer that just tasted like... well, *beer*. "Work's been really good."

"They paying you well enough? Even with you being a new graduate and all?"

He nodded. "Yeah, turns out the right connections really *will* get you anywhere. One of my instructors at NYU had a former student interning with the city council, and it turned out they needed a PR photographer, so... here I am."

"Hey, man, that's great," Steve told him. "And how's Nance doing at the *Sun-Times*?"

"She's definitely not fond of a few of her co-workers, but she enjoys the pieces she gets to write," Jonathan explained. "She's thinking about maybe branching off somewhere new after the baby comes."

"Good, good," Steve murmured in response before bringing his glass back to his lips.

Jonathan was starting to get the feeling that Steve was just exchanging pleasantries to dodge around something else that was on

his mind. "What about you?" he probed. "How's life been back here?"

Steve shrugged. "Same old, same old," he answered. "But honestly, after what we've seen go on around here, I'm *thankful* it's been so damn quiet."

"Me too," Jonathan agreed in earnest. There was a part of him that figured he'd never truly stop worrying about the possibility of another breach between dimensions. And if it ever came to it, he'd be on his way home in seconds to help his family deal with the consequences. That was simply one of the many reasons they'd decided to relocate a bit closer to home.

The two sat in silence for a moment, casually sipping their drinks, before Steve spoke up. "I met someone."

*There it was.* Jonathan could tell this is what he'd wanted to talk about from the start.

"That's great," he replied with a genuine smile. "I'm really happy for you, Steve."

The man nodded, but he looked nervous. "Yeah, she's really awesome. I feel like... I don't know, maybe she's... she's *it*? Like she's 'the one?'"

"What's her name?"

"Cathy. Well, Catherine, but... she's Cathy to me," he replied with a wistful sort of smile.

Jonathan had never seen Steve this... soft. He was usually the overly talkative, hyper-extroverted type that had originally put him off of him when they were in high school together. So this new side of him was sort of a welcome change. He wasn't sure if it was this new Steve putting him more at ease or if the alcohol was just starting to loosen him up, but either way, he definitely felt better than he had when they'd first entered the bar.

"So what are you thinking then?" Jonathan asked curiously. "Do you think you've been seeing each other long enough to... you know, start thinking about what comes next?"

He could see Steve's shoulders tense up at the mention of it, but he didn't jump to say 'no' either. "It's been a little over a year," he replied after a moment. "And I feel like a lot of people would say that's too soon, but... I don't know, it's just been a *really* great year."

"What's holding you back?" Jonathan asked, knowing there had to be more to this than he was letting on.

Steve hesitated, running a nervous hand through his hair, before draining the rest of his beer. "She's got a kid," he finally revealed. "His name's Simon, he's two. But the dad ditched town before he was even born, right after he found out Cathy got pregnant."

"That's awful," Jonathan sighed. He hated that it was almost *commonplace* for fathers to turn into deadbeats. Not always in an abusive fashion, like Neil Hargrove or Lonnie, but even Ted Wheeler had come to let the entire weight of his family's home life rest on his wife's shoulders. However, fathers who ran away from everything, like Simon's or Dustin's... he figured there had to be a *special* place in Hell reserved for them.

"So, what then? Are you afraid she'll say no?" Jonathan asked.

Steve ordered them each another drink before answering. "I don't know... Maybe, I guess?" he rationalized. "The whole time we've been together, she's always told me 'Simon comes first.' And I get it, I do. If it were me, I'd probably feel the same way! I just... I don't know. The kid's been through enough already. I don't want him to feel like he has to share his mom with me, you know?" he explained. "And there's always the issue of 'What if weird shit starts happening again?' I don't want to put them in danger or anything."

Jonathan pressed his lips into a solid line. "It sounds like you care about them. A lot."

Steve nodded. "I do. I really do," he sighed, taking a drink from his new, cold beer to clear his head. "How did you propose to Nancy? I mean, did you know she was...?"

"I asked her the minute we found out," he told him. "But not because I felt obligated or anything. I'd been planning on it for a while at that

point, so I just went ahead and asked. We were both really scared, but I wanted her to know that I was in it for the long haul," he explained. "I think it was good for us both."

"Are you still scared now?" Steve asked.

Jonathan hesitated. That was a damn good question.

Finally, he decided to just answer as truthfully as he could bear. "Yes," he admitted. "I *am* scared. I'm scared I won't be enough for them. I mean, I think about these questions all the time, like 'What if I somehow lose my job?' or 'What if I can't be home enough?'" he revealed, swallowing back the growing lump in his throat. "But that's nothing compared to..."

He paused. Did he really want to have this conversation with *Steve Harrington*? He considered tapering off his response, withholding his deepest, darkest thoughts where he could sort through them himself. But when he looked over and saw the amount of genuine concern on his friend's face, the words flew out without warning.

"I'm *fucking terrified* of ending up like Lonnie," he sighed. "My dad," he quickly clarified, realizing that Steve may not have even heard his father's name before this. "I know my mom loved him once, so he had to be *decent* at one point... or at least decent enough that my mom was able to stay with him even after he changed," he explained, tracing his finger methodically around the rim of his glass. "And if *he* could turn into the piece of shit he is now, then who's to say I won't?" he worried aloud, his voice softening with vulnerability he wasn't used to showing others. "I mean, he's my father, after all. Maybe it's bound to happen."

Steve stared at him for a moment, his expression completely unreadable, before he turned to the bartender and casually asked for a glass of water. Jonathan didn't know what he was doing, whether or not Steve would drink it himself or if he'd offer it to him to help calm his nerves or something.

But he was certainly not expecting him to throw it in his face.

"WHAT THE F—"

"Oh, just be grateful I didn't dump my beer on you instead," Steve snickered. "Mostly just because I'm too nice for that, but I'm also planning on finishing it," he said with a grin, taking another swig to illustrate his point.

Jonathan glared at him, shaking droplets out of his hair and airing out his jacket as best as he could. "So what *exactly* was that for then?"

"To clear your goddamn head, that's what," Steve told him. His voice had taken on a direct, almost stern tone that made it impossible for Jonathan not to take him seriously, even if he was supremely pissed at him for the moment.

"Jonathan, I don't know anything about your dad apart from small town gossip and the shit I've heard from your brother's friends," he started. "But I've heard enough to know that you're *nothing* like him," he insisted. "I don't think your father would have the balls to help expose a government cover-up, much less fight a literal *monster* out of *Hell*. But you did those things just because there was a *chance* it might help people. You didn't know if Will would come back, you didn't know if Barb's death would get paid for, but you went through Hell for it anyway. For Will and his friends, for Jane, for your mom... and yeah, for the woman who's about to have your freaking kid in a few weeks!"

Jonathan was definitely not expecting this sort of reaction, and the onslaught of support from the man who used to be his rival was almost shocking enough to make him stop breathing. "But I didn't have a choice..." he protested weakly. "I was involved, I got sucked in..."

"But you didn't try to run away. Not even once," he replied. "Not like your son-of-a-bitch dad. That sounds like a pretty stark contrast to me!" he proclaimed, finishing the contents of his glass. Jonathan had barely even touched his second drink; Steve's tolerance would never fail to amaze him.

Jonathan repeatedly opened his mouth to respond, but each time, he found that he was short of words. "I... I—"

Steve raised his eyebrows. "Unless that sentence was gonna be



something along the lines of, 'I'm gonna be the best dad in the fucking world,' I don't want to hear it," he told him, effectively cutting off what little was left of his train of thought. "Now finish your damn drink, Byers. I didn't buy you another one just for you to stare at it!"

After the initial shock wore off, Jonathan couldn't help the crooked smile that eventually spread across his face. Even after the prick had doused him in water! He supposed it wouldn't be the first time Steve Harrington had that sort of sleeper effect on people.

He picked up his glass without taking a sip, instead turning to face the man next to him. "Thanks, Steve," he replied. "Really, thank you."

He nodded casually. "You're welcome."

There was an awkward pause as the emotions within the room suddenly became palpable, and Jonathan cleared his throat to diffuse the tension. "...for the cider. Thank you for the cider," he joked, taking a large gulp.

Steve rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, sure. You're welcome, Byers... for the *cider*."

When Jonathan got dropped off at home, he was definitely not drunk. But he'd had enough that he was pleasurablely warm and happy, definitely enough to make the trip out worth it. "Thanks again for the ride," Jonathan told him once Steve had parked.

"Don't mention it," Steve waved him off. "Thanks for coming out."

Jonathan smiled, hesitating before he opened the door. "By the way... I think you should ask her."

"What?"

"Catherine. You should ask her to marry you," he elaborated. "At least start considering it."

The corners of Steve's lips twitched upward. "You didn't even know about her until an hour ago."

Jonathan shrugged as he stepped out of the car. "Yeah, but I can tell you're head-over-heels for her, and you care about Simon just as much. And if she's just as crazy about you, then I say you should go for it."

Steve grinned at his enthusiasm. "Okay, man, we'll see," he chuckled, patting his shoulder. "Now get your ass inside, drink some water, and go to sleep. I'm pretty sure no one wants you hungover on Christmas Eve."

Jonathan scoffed. "I'm not drunk."

Steve smirked with amusement. "And yet, you managed to put your coat on inside out..." he observed, raising a sarcastic eyebrow.

Jonathan looked down and realized he was unfortunately right. "...Screw you."

But by that time, the police cruiser was already backing out of the front yard, a laughing Steve leaning out the window to shout back at him before driving off. "Merry Christmas, Byers!"

Jonathan waved goodbye with a grin before realizing he was freezing. Since he wasn't wearing the insulated part of his coat on the inside, it was offering him little to no protection, especially since he was still a tiny bit damp from Steve's unconventional pep talk. He quickly shuffled inside, throwing off his outerwear and rubbing his hands together in the entryway to warm himself up, but he was almost immediately apprehended by Mike, who was grinning in a rather tipsy fashion.

"Shh... when you go in your room, don't make a sound or you'll wake her up."

Jonathan raised his eyebrows at him and El, who had suddenly approached from behind her boyfriend's back. "Nancy's asleep already?" It was barely 10pm.

"Yeah, your Mom and Hop are having a drink with my parents, and you and Steve were out drinking too... so El and I were having a little fun ourselves," Mike explained, gesturing casually to the bottle

of wine sitting on the coffee table. "Please keep this between us."

"He won't tell, Mike!" El insisted. "He and Nancy got vodka drunk *all the time* when they started dating... And they were younger than *us*!"

Jonathan rolled his eyes with a smirk. "Whatever, guys. I really don't care as long as you're not keeping Nancy up," he told them. "And I'm *not* drunk!"

However, when he brought his fiancée's name back up, El's face lit up as she began to giggle. She was always giggly when she drank. "Oh yeah, *Nancy*! That's what I came out here to tell you," she laughed. "Yeah, she's asleep... but I'm pretty sure you're gonna want your camera!"

"What? Why?" he asked, a slow smile taking over his face. Of course, he *always* thought Nancy was adorable when she was sleeping, but it was something he'd seen enough times already. Why did tonight warrant a photo over any other night? Overcome with curiosity, he followed the tipsy couple over to his room, El continuing to giggle the entire way there, until he finally pushed the door open with a soft creak.

He was suddenly no longer cold as his chest filled with warmth, his heart practically melting within him. Nancy was curled on her side, one hand beneath her head while the other laid over her womb. But that wasn't the only thing that was resting around her middle. She had taken one of his old headsets and rested the padded speakers on either side of her belly, presumably playing soft music to their baby within.

His arm reached out for his camera almost of its own accord, and he adjusted the lens until the serene expression on Nancy's face was perfectly in-focus. He was sure this would end up being one of his favorite pictures out of the thousands he'd taken through the years.

Smiling behind the camera, he captured the moment, but the loud *snap* of the shutter as he took the photo was enough to make his fiancée stir. "Jon?"

Mike began to snicker, trying to hide his laugh behind his hand as he

ducked out of the room. "He's *busted!*"

El giggled once more. "Goodnight," she said softly, giving her stepbrother a quick kiss on the cheek, before following her boyfriend out. He couldn't help but roll his eyes at their antics, but the smirk on his face was nothing but affectionate.

After quickly discarding his shoes and jeans, he crawled into bed behind Nancy, kissing her shoulder blade as he took her into his arms. "Sorry I woke you," he apologized. He *did* feel somewhat guilty for rousing her from such a peaceful state. "But you were so cute, you were practically *baiting* me to take your picture."

She smiled sleepily, using a fair bit of effort to roll over so she could see his face. "You always think I'm cute. What's new?"

Jonathan laughed. It was ridiculous how in love he felt right then. "That's a fair point," he replied with a grin before leaning down to kiss her.

She smiled against his lips, making a happy humming sound in her throat. "You taste good," she laughed. "Strongbow?"

Jonathan nodded. "Yeah, Steve bought me a couple."

Nancy smirked up at him. "That explains why you're so happy," she giggled.

He rolled his eyes, the smile never leaving his face. "Sue me," he replied, playfully kissing her nose before peppering the rest of her face with kisses.

That got a genuine laugh out of her, and at that moment, he could've sworn it was the loveliest sound he'd ever heard, better than any song he'd ever listened to... which reminded him...

"Seriously though, Nance, I'm really curious," he insisted, settling a gentle hand on her rounded belly. "What were you playing for her?"

She lifted the headset and placed it over his ears in response. He listened for a couple seconds before hearing the familiar trill of a Simon & Garfunkel cassette.

He chuckled. "I forgot we had this," he told her. "I think it was my mom's."

Nancy shook her head amusedly. "Nope. I think it's yours, and you're just too embarrassed to admit you like it."

Jonathan rolled his eyes, setting the headset aside on his dresser before curling back up beside her. "Fine... you win," he succumbed, coaxing a soft laugh out of her.

"It's alright, she likes it too," she told him, grabbing his hand and bringing it back to her tummy. "Like father, like daughter."

He smiled lovingly, rubbing his hand around a bit when their baby started moving at his touch. "Hmm... I guess that's fine for now," he supposed, leaning down to kiss the spot where their baby was kicking against his palm. "But don't worry. I'll show you the good stuff when you're older!"

Nancy shook her head with an amused smile, running her fingers lightly through his hair. "Oh, Jonathan..." she sighed affectionately. "You're cute when you're drunk."

*"I'm not drunk!"*

## 7. A Labor of Love

**Minor content warning: Semi-graphic description of labor and childbirth. Read at your own discretion!**

---

When Nancy went into labor, Jonathan couldn't recall ever driving faster than he did that night. Even before they'd gotten in the car, his body moved like a bullet from a gun despite the fact that he'd been dead asleep when she'd shaken him awake. It'd only taken him one look at her face to get him on his feet, and the minute he'd pulled on the first clothes he saw and grabbed their hospital bag, he was ushering them out the door and down to the parking garage, almost neglecting to lock the door to their apartment behind them in his haste.

Although it was January, the Windy City hadn't gotten a ridiculous amount of snow that night, and both of them couldn't be more thankful. The lack of ice, as well as the lack of traffic at 4 AM, allowed Jonathan the freedom to soar down the highway as fast as he damn well pleased, and Nancy didn't even contemplate asking him to slow down. She suspected that her contractions must have started while she was asleep and that she'd only woken up once they'd become intense enough to yank her out of a deep sleep. That was the only way her mind could justify it being this painful already.

They were just reaching their exit when another one surged through her, her face twisting with discomfort. She remembered something that her OB-GYN, Dr. Jazka, had told her about holding all of her sound in and using that energy to focus on her breathing (and later, pushing), but at that moment, she couldn't bring herself to listen to professional advice. She leaned over in her seat, as far as her belly allowed, and let out a long moan. "Owwww...!"

Jonathan was already pushing it by going 10 over the speed limit, but he quickly kicked it up another notch as they approached the entrance, pushing his foot down a bit further on the gas. "I know it hurts, Nance, I know. We're almost there!" he assured her, reaching out to take her hand in his.

Thankfully, the contraction had ended by the time he pulled up to the hospital, which made it much easier to get her out of the passenger seat and into a wheelchair as he threw his keys to the emergency valet attendant. As soon as he pushed her into the lobby, Nancy let the receptionist know that they were pre-registered, and after quickly punching their names into the computer, she called over a couple of nurses to take them into a room.

The minute she was settled, another nurse entered and began to do the usual preliminary assessments, taking Nancy's blood pressure and listening to both mother and baby's heart rate before sitting at the foot of the bed to check how dilated her cervix was. Jonathan and Nancy exchanged a brief look when the nurse's eyes widened a bit. "Is everything okay?" Nancy asked worriedly.

"Yes, of course! I'm just a little bit shocked you're already this far along, being a first time mom and all," she explained, smiling reassuringly. "You're at 4 cm already. Nearly halfway there!"

Since she had already progressed much further than they'd originally anticipated, the nurse, who introduced herself as Emma, quickly left the room to page Dr. Jazka, instructing the two of them to press the call button if they needed anything immediately. Jonathan let out a breath he hadn't even known he'd been holding as he took a seat next to Nancy's bed. He didn't know what to say for a moment, so he simply wrapped his fingers around hers and gave her what he hoped looked like an encouraging smile. "Not much longer now," he finally decided on, giving her hand a squeeze.

She smiled tiredly back at him, but her short-lived happiness was quickly wiped off her face by the start of yet *another* contraction.

It was going to be a long day.

---

A couple more hours slowly passed, and Nancy eventually insisted that she wanted to walk around for a while to try to speed things up a bit more. In addition to her simply being bored, being stuck in bed had also started to take a major toll on her back, and she wanted to take advantage of being able to stretch her legs since she hadn't opted for an epidural. She'd wanted to do things naturally, if at all possible,

after having read that natural births statistically yielded better outcomes for both mothers and newborns, as well as the quickest recovery rates for new mothers. And if there was one thing Jonathan had learned about his fiancée after all the shit they'd been through, it was that she was stubborn as hell and tough as nails.

"You're a total badass, you know that, right?" he reminded her as they slowly trekked down the maternity ward, his arm wrapped loosely around her back in case she lost her balance.

Nancy scoffed. "I don't feel like it," she disagreed, resting a hand over her bulbous belly. "I mean, we've literally fought monsters before, Jonathan... and back then, I could actually see my toes."

"Well, you *were* pretty badass then too, but you still are now," he insisted. "C'mon, Nance, think about it: You just grew an entirely new human being. For *three quarters of a year!*" he exclaimed, slightly flabbergasted by the fact that so many women went through this everyday like it was no big deal. "That's probably the most badass thing I can think of."

Nancy couldn't help but giggle at his sudden outpouring of support. "Well, I'm glad it's still awe-inspiring for you, but I really just want to meet her already," she sighed. "Hopefully sooner rather than later."

"I know," he said, nodding his agreement. "Me too."

They continued to walk a little further before her next contraction stopped her in her tracks. They'd developed a sort of routine by this point, Nancy wrapping her arms around Jonathan's neck and leaning into him while he gently swayed with her to take some of the pressure off her back. To the rest of the world, it almost looked as if they could be slow dancing, apart from Nancy's panting breaths and pained expression.

"You're doing great, Nance," Jonathan whispered, dropping a soft kiss into her hair. "Really, you are."

With a quiet whimper, Nancy let her forehead fall against his chest as he helped support her weight. "They're really getting strong now," she managed to get out once it had ended, letting loose a shaky exhale.



Jonathan moved one of his hands from her hips over to her lower back, gently massaging his fingers around the area that had been bothering her for a while. "Should we start heading back?" he asked softly.

Nancy hesitated, turning her head to look further down the sterile, white corridor. "I want to go look in the nursery first," she replied, smiling gently. "Remind myself what we have to look forward to."

"Are you sure you can make it?"

"Yes, Jonathan. I'm a badass, remember?" She replied with a smirk, straightening up and pressing her hand into her back as she began to make her way down the hall again. "Now, are you coming or not?"

Jonathan couldn't help but grin as he followed in her footsteps. "You're the boss."

---

Things really started to pick up within the next hour or so as Nancy entered what Dr. Jazka called "transition."

"I know you're in a lot of pain right now," she said to Nancy, who was panting heavily in the aftermath of a drawn-out contraction. "But even though this is the most intense stage, it's also the shortest. I promise you'll be pushing your baby out in no time at all!"

However, Nancy didn't find this very encouraging. "I can't... ugh," The ongoing pressure in her abdomen made her choke around her words. With a loud retch, she leaned over to the side of her bed, and Jonathan managed to sneak a vomit bag under her nose just in time. As soon as she was finished, she collapsed back against her pillows, tears streaming down her face. "I don't think I can do this!" she sobbed, her arms tightly wrapped around her swollen middle.

"Yes, you can, Nancy. Of course you can," Jonathan whispered sincerely, but unlike the previous times he'd said it that morning, she obviously wasn't taking it to heart anymore.

She shook her head exhaustedly. "I-I can't," she hiccupped. "It hurts... I'm so scared, Jonathan."

He could practically feel his heart breaking in half as he saw the defeated look on her face, but before he could decide how to best respond, Nurse Emma peeked her head in through the door. "Mr. Byers, your family just arrived."

"Jonathan is fine, Emma, and you can just tell them to wait—"

But Nancy suddenly cut him off by squeezing his arm. "No! No, I want to see your mom," she insisted, her eyes lighting up a bit. "Emma, can you bring Joyce in? Please!"

Jonathan was a bit surprised, but nevertheless, he nodded his agreement to the nurse. He supposed it might do some good for her to talk to someone who'd been through the same thing before. And as much as Karen Wheeler wished she could ditch her husband in Hawkins, she wouldn't be arriving until late that night since Ted had the car at work. And frankly, Jonathan figured seeing his mother would probably help to calm his *own* nerves, as well.

Barely even a minute after Emma initially left the room, Joyce Hopper-Byers frantically raced through the door, smiling widely in anticipation of her granddaughter's arrival. "Oh my goodness! Hello, sweetheart," she greeted her future daughter-in-law, leaning down to press a kiss to her forehead.

Nancy smiled tightly up at her. "Hi, Joyce," she replied quietly, trying to hold back tears. "Thank you for being here."

"Sweetie, there's no place I'd rather be right now," she assured her before stepping around to the other side of the bed to embrace her son. "Hello, darling."

Jonathan smiled into his mother's shoulder. "Hi, Mom," he replied, genuinely thankful for her comforting presence; he could already feel a lot of the nervous tension leaving his body. However, when he heard Nancy let out a small cry of pain at the beginning of a contraction, he quickly broke out of the hug and offered his hand to his fiancée, assuming his original position beside her. She needed comfort more than he did. "Squeeze as hard as you have to, alright?"

"That goes for me, too," Joyce added, taking her other hand.

Nancy did not hold back, nearly turning both of their hands white by the time the contraction began to wind down. "I just want her *out*!" she pleaded to no one in particular.

Jonathan reflexively opened his mouth to respond, but his mother beat him to it. "She will be *very* soon," Joyce reminded her, reaching out to wipe sweat-soaked strands of hair from her face. "I know it hurts, sweetheart. This really is the worst part of it," she sympathized. "But you're almost done! And I promise, as soon as you have that precious angel in your arms, you're not even going to care how much it hurts right now."

Nancy gripped her hand tighter, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. "But I feel like I shouldn't be as scared as I am," she mused. "I mean, I've known this was coming. For *months*!"

"Oh, everyone feels that way. But having your body feel like it's betraying you is a scary thing for anyone to have to go through," she assured her. "It's *okay* to be scared, Nancy. I was *terrified* when I had Jonathan. And Will too, in fact. There's no avoiding it," she told her. "But your body is designed to do this; it *will* do this. And just because it scares you doesn't mean it's too much for you to handle."

Jonathan was floored by his mother's quiet wisdom, shooting her a grateful look as Nancy seemed to relax a bit. "I honestly don't think there's *anything* that Nancy Wheeler can't handle," he joked in response, planting a kiss on her brow. That drew a small, watery laugh out of her, and it was like pure music to his ears after hearing her in so much pain all morning. "I love you so much, Nance," he continued with a soft smile.

"I love you too," she whispered.

"You can do this."

She hesitated for a moment before nodding and giving his hand a squeeze. "I know," she acknowledged, blinking away the last remnants of her tears. They held each other's gaze for another moment until Nancy let out a groan at the start of another contraction, her eyes suddenly widening. "Oh—Oh my God."

"What is it, honey?" Joyce asked calmly.

"I feel like... Agh, I think I need to *push!*"

Without a second of hesitation, Jonathan practically dived for the call button, not putting any thought into where his other limbs had to go. It took everything Joyce had not to laugh when he tripped over his own feet in the process.

---

After Joyce had kissed both of them for good luck and returned to her family in the waiting room, the soon-to-be parents were quickly moved into a delivery suite.

And now that she'd been pushing for a while, Nancy's little remaining focus felt scattered like leaves blown across a sidewalk, but she was too exhausted to bend down and gather them into a pile. She hardly had time to think anymore due to the fact that her contractions were basically happening on top of one another, and Dr. Jazka continued to coach her with barely any pause.

"Alright, Nancy, another one's starting... and PUSH!"

She semi-consciously felt herself squeezing the life out of Jonathan's warm hand as she tried to bear down. His eyes barely moved from her face, and whenever she was able to hear past the ringing in her ears, she vaguely registered his gentle, loving encouragements.

"You're so strong, Nance. You've got this," he assured her, his free arm supporting her from behind while she held his other hand captive in her clenched fist. "You're doing such a great job."

Even though the pain was blurring her vision, she could see the fuzzy outline of people at the foot of her bed. Emma and a couple of other nurses stood off to the side, brandishing towels and suction devices and other tools she could not name and didn't care to know about. She saw Dr. Jazka's lips moving, but a good chunk of her words were lost through the haze.

"Good work, Nancy. Once more for me..."

Time had somehow lost meaning to her ages ago, but she felt like she

had to have been pushing for *days*. She was utterly spent, and she honestly wasn't even sure how much progress she'd actually made. All she knew anymore was the pain. Constant, burning, mind-numbing pain... until suddenly, something finally gave. She screamed, momentarily blinded by the pain, but she was brought back when she felt Jonathan's lips murmuring a litany of "I love you"s into her sweat-soaked hair.

"There's her head, Nancy," Emma's voice rang out from her place next to Dr. Jazka. "You're almost done!"

Panting with the exertion, Nancy started to take in another deep breath in preparation to push again, but Dr. Jazka held up her hand and shook her head. "Wait! Not quite yet, dear," she instructed. "There's just a bit of the umbilical cord around her neck."

Nancy's eyes widened to an even bigger size than they already were, and the beginnings of panic began to bubble within her. The deepest, darkest parts of her imagination began to conjure up the worst possible scenarios, and she felt herself slipping into an all-too-familiar cradle of anxiety. But her eyes refocused on what was in front of her when Jonathan placed himself within her line of vision, apparently having recognized her distress.

"Hey, shhh... it's okay. Just focus on breathing, alright?" Jonathan encouraged her, cupping his hands around her face so she was looking at him rather than at whatever Dr. Jazka was doing. Without letting go of her, he chanced a timid glance around to the foot of the bed where the obstetrician's practiced hands were working, and she saw his jaw drop. He let out a heavy exhale that sounded both relieved and completely awestruck as he turned back to her, his eyes now shimmering with tears. "They're just moving it out of the way. She's gonna be fine," he explained to her reassuringly. "You're *so close*, Nance. She's almost here!"

"Jon, what if—"

"Shhhhhh... she's gonna be fine," he repeated, gently but firmly. "Everything's okay. Just *breathe*."

She weakly bobbed her head, resisting the horrible urge to push.

Instead, she tried to focus on breathing in sync with him until Dr. Jazka finally gave her the go-ahead.

Everything moved very rapidly after that. Dr. Jazka had Emma and one of the other nurses holding her knees back to help get the baby's shoulders out, and by that point, Nancy hardly had enough breath left in her to continue. For a moment or two, she was almost certain she was going to pass out.

But finally, at 11:36am on January 13th, 1992, there was a large gush as the horrid pressure finally ceased, and she fell back against Jonathan's arm with a final, strangled cry. As soon as he realized it was over, he gently lowered her down to rest upon the mountain of pillows arranged behind her. Her head lolled back weakly against the palm of his hand as the room spun around her. She closed her eyes as she felt herself becoming dizzy, and for a moment, she was so disoriented that she didn't know whether or not she'd actually managed to give birth. Was it really over?

But after a brief silence, a high-pitched newborn wail rang across the room, piercing through the still air and announcing their daughter's presence to the world.

Nancy heard a thick *snip* as the cord was cut, and she soon felt a warm weight being placed on her chest, which she instinctively wrapped her arms around and pulled closer to her. She slowly lifted her head, knowing her life was about to change forever, and opened her tired eyes to see her baby for the first time.

And there she was... tiny and trembling and absolutely *perfect*.

Nancy burst into exhausted, happy tears as the nurses rubbed the crying newborn down with warm towels to help adjust her to the cooler environment outside of the womb. "Hi, baby girl," she greeted her breathlessly, hoping the sound of her voice might help comfort her child. However, while her daughter continued to voice her displeasure, the new mother was simultaneously laughing and crying as she snuggled the squalling infant close.

Jonathan appeared to be doing the same; she could hear his mixture of laugh-sobs at her side and soon felt his teary face against her own

as he leaned in to kiss her head. "You did it," he whispered shakily against her sweat-slicked forehead. "I'm *so proud* of you."

She grinned, feeling as if she could burst with the love she felt for him, for their baby, but regardless of how much she loved her husband-to-be, the whole of her attention was captivated by their child in her arms. As cliché as she knew it sounded, she had truly never seen a more beautiful sight in all her life, even if she was a little discolored and covered in a sheen of blood and birth matter. But she was alive, and she was *theirs*, and that was *all* that mattered.

Taking another few moments to catch her breath, Nancy pulled the baby closer still, suddenly overcome with the need to comfort her as she bawled. "Shhh... I know, I know. That must not have been fun for you either, huh?" she sympathized, kissing her tiny little conehead. "But you're here now, sweetheart... and we're *so happy* to see you."

As she continuously cooed sweet nothings, Nancy immediately began to pick up on some of the resemblances she bore to both her and Jonathan. Her tiny mouth and nose were angled similarly to her father's, but on the other hand, she had inherited her mother's big blue eyes and heart-shaped face. She also had *quite* the set of lungs, but as she took comfort in her mother's warmth, her loud cries gradually diminished until they were no more than tiny scared whimpers while the nurses continued to make sure she was healthy. However, no one would have minded at all even if she *had* continued to screech, considering her brief oxygen scare with the umbilical cord. But considering how loud she'd been initially, she seemed to be perfectly fine in spite of the incident.

Nancy's heart continued to swell with a seemingly infinite amount of love as she lightly stroked the downy soft spirals upon her daughter's crown. Although she had her mother's curls, they appeared to be the same hue as Jonathan's dirty blonde, and soon enough, his larger hand joined her own to cuddle the towel-wrapped newborn, gently rubbing her tiny back. They were both silent for a minute or two, completely transfixed by their daughter, until Nancy turned her head at the sound of his choked-up voice.

There were just as many happy tears streaming down his face as hers while he drank in the sight of his little family. She didn't think she'd

ever seen this much pure, unfiltered love fixed in his gaze."You're *amazing*, Nance," he spoke softly, almost reverently, while taking care not to startle their baby girl.

She smiled at him before returning her gaze to the squirming child in her arms. "*She's* amazing," she laughed, leaning down to kiss her baby's forehead again. "I can't believe that she was *inside me* just twenty minutes ago," she marveled. "We *made* this, Jonathan!"

Her words brought a proud grin to his face. "Yeah... I guess we did a pretty good job, huh?" he chuckled tearfully.

As the infant nuzzled herself closer to Nancy, he couldn't resist playing with her tiny digits, which looked so ridiculously *small* next to his own hand. But his smile grew even wider, his chest clenching with emotion, when her wrinkled little fingers curled experimentally around one of his own, holding onto him with a strength he hadn't known a newborn could possess.

Another fresh wave of tears threatened to overflow Nancy's eyes at the heartwarming sight before her. "Oh, I love you so much," she whispered to the baby in her arms, pressing yet another kiss to her small head before looking up at Jonathan. "Both of you," she added with a choked-up laugh, leaning forward to touch her forehead to his.

"I love you too," he replied, smiling as he leaned in to kiss Nancy's lips and his daughter's tiny crown. "Both of you."

---

Before long, as the initial chaos surrounding her birth began to wind down, the baby was taken to the other side of the room to be cleaned off while Nancy delivered the afterbirth and was helped to clean up herself. The new mother had all but demanded that Jonathan get out his camera and document the brief moments that their daughter was blocked from her view, and he was more than happy to oblige. He snapped photo after photo of the freshly-washed baby girl as she was measured and weighed for the first time, and he grinned like an idiot all the while, even though she had started crying again, which simultaneously made his heart ache a bit.

But when she was calm again after a nurse transferred her back into



Nancy's arms, he could hardly stop himself. He wanted to capture every single detail, from the wiggling of her tiny toes to her bleary little eyes blinking up at her mother. And of course, the radiant smile that shone on his fiancée's face as she fawned over that which she had just brought into the world.

But before long, the nurses wanted to move Nancy to the recovery room, making it hard for him to continue taping. Nancy couldn't help but laugh at the look of resignation on his face as he replaced his camera in their bag. "We've got her whole life ahead of us, Jon," she teased him as they began rolling her bed towards the door. "Ten minutes won't hurt."

However, the transition ended up taking *far* longer than that. Once they got into the hallway, the baby was taken once again so that she could spend a little bit of time in the nursery for observation while Nancy was getting settled, the new mother's defiant pout failing to convince the hospital staff otherwise. However, once they reached their new room, she had to admit that it felt good to finally ditch her flimsy hospital gown. Jonathan and Emma delicately helped her to change into a pair of mesh shorts (which admittedly just felt like an adult diaper) and a cozy button-up nightgown, as well as a pair of warm slipper socks.

She could have jumped for joy if she wasn't so damned sore! This was perhaps the first time she'd felt properly comfortable since her seventh month of pregnancy when she'd really begun to feel the strain of carrying her baby. And although she'd enjoyed being able to feel her daughter move and grow in the last few weeks, it was immensely relieving to have her living outside of her, at last.

Finally, once Nancy was suitable and sitting up in bed, their baby was brought into the room in a small rolling cot, swaddled and half-asleep after her time spent in the nursery. Nancy felt as if her heart could burst as she watched her daughter yawn drowsily, her tiny mouth forming a perfectly round 'o' shape. She felt slightly guilty for picking her up and disturbing her in her sleepy state, but her arms ached to hold her baby again after their brief separation.

Of course she'd known that she would love this little thing with all her heart, but she'd underestimated just how powerful that love

would be. It was like her heart had simply doubled in size in order to accommodate the intensity of the emotions she now felt. And indeed, the moment the infant was in her arms again, her entire being was flooded with a joyful warmth as the oxytocin ran rampant within her. It was so intoxicating that it took a minute or so for Dr. Jazka to catch her attention. However, the OB-GYN smiled knowingly, obviously understanding the magnetism that Nancy felt towards her child.

"Do we have a name for the birth certificate yet?" she asked curiously.

Nancy shifted her gaze over to Jonathan, silently asking with her eyes if he agreed with the name they'd previously discussed a couple of weeks before. A wide grin overtook her face when he smiled and nodded his approval back at her. Their baby had a *name*!

"Elizabeth Barbara Byers," she replied proudly, kissing her baby's soft, sweet-smelling head. "But we're going to call her 'Libby,' for short."

"That's lovely," Dr. Jazka replied, quickly jotting the name down on her pad before looking back up at the family. "Well, in short, Elizabeth is perfectly healthy, weighed in at 7 lbs., 4 oz., and she passed both rounds of her APGAR tests with flying colors. So we'll keep you just one standard overnight for observation, and as long as things continue the way they're going, the three of you should be headed home by tomorrow afternoon! How does that sound?"

Nancy smiled contently as she thought of the new journey they were about to begin by taking their daughter home with them after months of waiting and preparation. She wasn't naïve; she knew they had a lot of work ahead of them, and there would be lots of difficult moments along the way. They were both still young, and there would be a lot to learn. But as she looked down at their baby girl, who was beginning to doze off again in her arms, she knew already that she was worth any hardships they'd have to overcome.

"That sounds *perfect*."

---

*LIBBY BYERS HAS ARRIVED, AT LAST! I've been super excited to post*

*this chapter, y'all, and now that Nancy and Jonathan finally have their baby, I'm really excited to continue writing them as parents. Please comment and let me know if there are any specific moments of Libby's infancy and childhood that you would like to see written out, and I will do my best to incorporate it into the story somehow!*

*Hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I'll try to post the next one soon, in which the Hopper-Byers family (+Mike) gets to meet Nancy and Jonathan's new addition :)*

## 8. Introducing Elizabeth

After what felt like ages, the new little family was finally given some well-deserved alone time, and Nancy and Jonathan couldn't be more glad for the peace it brought them to observe their daughter for a bit without the overarching presence of the hospital staff.

They were cuddled together in bed watching as Nancy nursed Elizabeth for the first time, Jonathan's arms wrapped around her from behind with his chin lightly resting on her shoulder. Even after being coached by the lactation assistant, it had still taken both mother and baby a few tries to latch properly, but now that they'd managed it, it felt like the most natural thing in the world to Nancy. Libby also seemed to be *very* satisfied with her first meal, and the new parents found it impossible not to laugh at the sound of her tiny snorts and snuffles as she greedily fed on her mother's colostrum.

"Wow. You have a big appetite, don't you?" Nancy observed once she had finished, gently rubbing the baby's back with gentle pats until she let out an adorable burp. "Just like your daddy!" she remarked, smiling as she wiped a tiny bit of dribble from her daughter's lips.

Jonathan rolled his eyes, but his smile grew quite a bit upon hearing his new title. "Hey, she's a growing girl! Aren't you, Libby?" he murmured sweetly down at her, lightly stroking her soft cheek with his finger.

After her recent snooze in the nursery and then in Nancy's arms, Elizabeth was now wide awake, and she squinted, albeit unfocused, up at her father as he leaned down to talk to her. Nancy almost let out an audible sigh at the precious moment, but it quickly turned to uncontrollable giggles as the baby turned her head to taste Jonathan's hand, sucking contentedly on his knuckle of his index finger.

"And it looks like she's still hungry!" she laughed, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes while Jonathan grinned down at her. And that's when she realized... he hadn't actually had a chance to *hold* her yet in the brief hour that she'd been born. He hadn't even asked, being the overly self-sacrificing person she knew him to be.

With a grin of her own, Nancy reached over with one arm and grabbed the collar of his long-sleeved t-shirt, trying to yank it upward. At the resulting confusion on his face, she gestured down towards their daughter lying against her own naked skin, her chest bared after undoing the top few buttons of her nightgown.

"C'mon, Jon, I *know* you want to hold her, and she needs to bond with you too while she's actually awake," she teased him. "But it's called 'skin-to-skin' for a reason, so lose the shirt!"

He reached up and glided his shirt off as she told him, sliding over to sit beside her rather than behind her. "I feel exposed," he laughed as goose bumps began to arise on his arms due to the coolness of the room.

She smirked, fixing him with a deathly pointed look. "How do you think I felt the last few hours, hm?" she teased, raising an eyebrow at him.

A slight, sheepish blush arose in his cheeks as he realized how ridiculous his statement sounded in comparison. "...Sorry."

Nancy grinned at him affectionately, quietly laughing and shaking her head with amusement as she began to shift Elizabeth towards him. The baby girl immediately let out a whine of protest, clearly distressed at being removed from her mother's warmth, but Nancy quickly spoke to her as she moved, reassuring her that she was still there. "It's okay, sweetie. Go say hi to Daddy now," she cooed softly before handing her carefully over to Jonathan.

The new father was flustered for a couple of seconds as the newborn continued to whimper, but a rush of instinct soon kicked in and he pulled her close. "Shhh... it's alright, Libby," he murmured, lifting her so he could kiss her forehead. "I'm right here, sweetheart. I've got you."

She'd already started to open her eyes at the sound of her father's voice, but from the moment his lips touched her skin, she slowly began to calm herself down, her unhappy noises gradually fading into contented gurgles.

As her heart overflowed at the sight of the two of them together, Nancy laid her head against Jonathan's bare shoulder and watched as he cuddled her delicately against his chest. "You're a natural," she commented, letting out a yawn as she made herself comfortable leaning into his side.

A small smile graced his lips at her words, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from his daughter.

His daughter. He had a *daughter*! A few years ago, he never would've believed he'd be here, sitting next to a woman he loved who genuinely loved him back, and holding a child they'd *created* from that love. He'd been nothing more than the town loner. The freak. The one who always hid himself behind a camera or a book rather than a bottle like the majority of Hawkins High.

He was the one who'd never really had a proper father figure himself until Hopper joined his family. And even by then, he was practically a man already, having had to grow up far too quickly. He'd never gotten many chances to just be a kid, and even when he *was* younger, his father never really treated him like he was his son. A good portion of his childhood memories were tainted with the constant sting of his abuse. Mostly verbal, but he'd gotten smacked around a fair bit, as well, when his mother had been out of earshot and his father was pissed enough.

But as he looked down at Elizabeth, everything finally seemed like it fit into place within his heart. Because, no matter what, he was going to make sure he was the exact opposite of Lonnie Byers. He'd be the kind of father for his daughter that his younger self had always wanted. And as long as she was safe and happy, then that was all that would matter to him in the end.

He didn't realize he was crying until Nancy touched his face and wiped a drop of moisture from his cheek. He turned his head and found that there were tears in her eyes, as well. Just by the expression on her face, he could tell that she already knew what he was thinking about; she'd always been able to read his mind like an open book, and he could often say the same for hers.

"You're not Lonnie, Jonathan. He may be your father, but you are

*nothing* like him," she whispered, cupping her left hand around the side of his face. "And if he wasn't able to look at you and Will the way that you're looking at Elizabeth right now, then that's his loss. But you are *so much better* than he ever could be."

He leaned into her touch gratefully, turning his head towards her palm so he could press his lips to the faded scar there. "*You* make me better," he murmured against her skin before returning his eyes to her gaze.

She shook her head. "No. You've *always* been better than him," she assured her fiancé. "You take after your mom; you're kind and gentle and brave. And I know you're going to be every bit the kind of father our daughter deserves."

Jonathan didn't know how he managed to get words out past the emotional lump in his throat. "Thank you," he told her with a grateful smile. "But I *still* think you've made me a better person in the long run."

Nancy smiled, as well, leaning her forehead against his. "Well... for what it's worth, I like who *I* am more with you, too," she replied, unable to imagine a more perfect moment than this, just being with the two people she adored most. She could only think of one thing that could possibly make her any happier than she already was. So she leaned in to kiss him, her scarred hand still touching his cheek while her other arm helped cradle Libby, who was sandwiched comfortably between them. Their embrace could have lasted minutes or mere seconds, she wasn't really sure. But they eventually broke apart when their daughter made a cute sound that almost seemed to cry, 'Pay attention to me!' Both parents grinned down at the baby girl, nuzzling against the warmth of her father's skin, and neither of them could help themselves as they began to coo back at her.

And that was the moment they realized that Elizabeth Barbara Byers would have the power to make both of them better, too.

---

Although he never wanted to let her go, Jonathan soon passed Libby back to Nancy, and after making sure they were ready for visitors, he pulled on his shirt and started off towards the waiting room to go

search for his family. As soon as he started to approach where he knew they'd be waiting, he could hardly contain a laugh at how they'd seemed to make themselves right at home. His mother was dozing off against Hopper's shoulder, and Will sat on her other side, blasting music through a pair of cheap headphones. Jonathan could tell even from a fair distance that he was listening to the Chili Peppers' latest album as Will bobbed his head in time with the end of "Under the Bridge."

On another couch perpendicular to theirs, El was cuddled up against Mike. The two were both still home from Purdue on their Winter Break, but Mike had presumably opted to tag along with the Hopper-Byers family to Chicago that day rather than wait for his own parents to drive up later. El had kicked off her ballet flats on the floor and pulled her feet up onto the cushion beside her, her head resting on her boyfriend's shoulder. But rather than dozing sleepily like his mother, she was watching with interest as Mike passed the time on a Game Boy.

It looked like he was about to offer her a turn to play, but Jonathan's presence became known before he gave her the chance. As he continued far enough down the hallway that he was visible to his family, El was the first to jump to her feet since her couch faced him head-on and Mike was still thoroughly engrossed in his game.

"Is she here?!" the girl squealed, and upon seeing Jonathan's affirmative grin, she sprinted the remaining distance between them and threw her arms around her stepbrother.

Her celebratory noise woke his mother up in a second flat, and within another second, she was embracing him too. "Oh, Jonathan, I just can't believe it!" she cried, her eyes filling up with tears. "How'd it go? How is she? How's Nancy doing?"

Jonathan laughed, drinking in the overjoyed and curious expressions of his family. "Whoa, slow down, Mom," he teased, but he couldn't blame her; he was excited too, after all. "Nancy and the baby are both doing great," he reported, unable to wipe the smile off his face. "Everything turned out fine."

Joyce let out a high-pitched, happy noise and gave him another



squeeze before Will fought her off for his turn to hug his brother tightly. When the two pulled away from each other, the younger Byers brother had an awestruck expression on his face as he stared at the elder. "I can't believe you're a *dad*," he marveled. "How does it feel?"

If possible, Jonathan's grin grew even wider. His face was starting to get sore, but he couldn't bring himself to care in the slightest. "I honestly can't believe it either..." he admitted. "But it's pretty amazing. She's just... She's *perfect*."

"What's her name?" El piped up, leaning over Will's shoulder so she could see Jonathan through the crowd that was now gathered around him.

He smiled and reached out for his sister, pulling her back towards him and wrapping his arm around her shoulders. He definitely wanted to be able to see her reaction for this. "*El-izabeth*," he enunciated, making it definitively clear who he and Nancy had initially thought of as a namesake. "We're gonna call her Libby though, for short, most of the time... but her full name is Elizabeth Barbara Byers."

There was a cumulative 'awww' from the majority of the group, but El remained silent, staring open-jawed up at her brother's face. "What?" she squeaked, seemingly unable to process what she'd just heard. "Did you really—You... after *me*?"

He nodded down at her with an affectionate smile. "Of course."

Her eyes began to glimmer with tears as she hugged him again. He could feel her tears seeping into his shirt and hear her sniffing back cries, so he simply held her for a moment, resting his chin on her head and patting her back. When she finally stepped back, allowing Mike to wrap his arm around her again, she gave her brother a tearful smile. "Jonathan, I'm honored," she told him sincerely, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. "But... *why me*?"

Jonathan had to hold back the urge to roll his eyes at her modesty, but for the sake of being genuine, he restrained himself. "El, you've saved our asses so many times... But even if you hadn't, it'd still be a

privilege to name our kid after you," he explained. "We're glad you found your way into our lives, and... well, I guess this is just kind of our way of showing it."

That seemed to bring the tears back, so she hid her face in Mike's shoulder for a moment before facing him again. "Can we meet her?"

The new father nodded proudly. "Yeah, of course," he replied. "We just had to wait until Nancy got transferred and was able to feed her and everything, but they're settled now."

With that, Jonathan began to lead the group towards Nancy's room, and he soon felt a strong hand clap his shoulder as they walked. Just as he suspected, it belonged to his stepfather, who was now walking beside him with his other arm wrapped around a significantly emotional Joyce. "Congratulations, kid," he said with a smile. "You and Nancy are gonna be great at this, I can tell."

Jonathan chuckled. "Are you really still calling me 'kid,' Hop? I've got one of my own now."

Hopper gave his shoulder a squeeze. "Sorry, Jonathan. You're always gonna be 'kid' to me," he told him. "*Your* kid will just have to be 'kiddo' or something. Haven't really decided yet."

He laughed. "I'm sure you'll figure it out," he assured the older man as they arrived back at the maternal recovery ward.

Once they reached Nancy's room, Jonathan held up a finger, signaling for his family to wait a moment, and peeked his head in through the door. Nancy was holding Libby propped up against her knees, which were drawn up towards her chest as far as she could comfortably manage. Her face lit up when she noticed he'd returned. "Hey!"

"Hey," he greeted her, his heart swelling at the sight before him. "Is she asleep? Should I tell them to keep it down?"

Nancy shook her head. "Not quite," she told him as she played with her daughter's tiny hands. "I think she's still a little milk-drunk though."

Jonathan grinned. "Perfect," he laughed, opening the door wider to let his family know that it was okay to enter. However, before they started to file in, he selfishly surged forward and reclaimed the seat next to Nancy's bed, wanting to be as close to them as possible before Elizabeth was undoubtedly passed around. But when Nancy scooted over a bit to make room for him on the bed, he gladly climbed up and occupied the space next to her instead.

Unsurprisingly, Joyce was the first to reach them, seizing the chair that her son had vacated. The woman brought her hands to her mouth and gasped upon seeing her first grandbaby cuddled up to her mother. "Oh, Nancy... she's just *beautiful*," she gushed, her eyes sparkling as she gazed at Libby. "Congratulations!"

Nancy smiled widely upon seeing Joyce's emotional reaction. "She is, isn't she?" she laughed in agreement. "Do you want to hold her?"

The new grandmother's eyes lit up. "May I?"

"Of course," she replied, handing the baby over to Jonathan to give to her.

Jonathan grinned as he ferried his daughter across the bed into his mother's arms. "Libby, meet your Grandma Joyce."

It didn't take long for the tears to overflow down Joyce's face as she cradled the baby girl. "Hello, little one," she greeted the baby in her arms before addressing the new parents once again. "She's so precious! Jonathan, she looks a lot like you did when you were born."

"Really?" Nancy asked, never having seen a picture of a newborn Jonathan.

Joyce nodded. "Yes... but he was much balder," she giggled, much to Jonathan's dismay. He rolled his eyes as Nancy playfully ribbed him, but their attention was quickly drawn back to the small crowd that had started to gather around their baby.

Of course, his entire family was transfixed as they stared down at Libby, but El seemed a bit tense. It was almost as if she was a little frightened as well as enamored by the child in Joyce's arms while the

rest of them cooed and awwed at her. It suddenly crossed Jonathan's mind that perhaps she had never actually seen a baby before. For the first twelve years of her life, the only other child she'd ever interacted with was Kali, and she barely remembered those earlier days as it was.

So when Joyce offered the baby out for El to hold, he wasn't surprised when she took a hesitant step back. "I don't know how," she quickly insisted, a brief flicker of fear flashing across her face. "I don't want to hurt her."

The terrified look on her face was enough to make Nancy want to cry. She quickly nudged Jonathan, signaling for him to stand up and make room for El on the bed. "Come sit," Nancy encouraged her, patting the spot next to her where her fiancé had just been.

El obeyed, climbing onto the mattress and lightly resting her head on Nancy's shoulder. "I'm *really* happy for you both," she said sincerely. "But I've never even been around a baby before. I don't know what to do," she explained, confirming Jonathan's previous suspicions.

Nancy smiled. "That's why we're going to help you," she assured her, giving the girl a quick hug. "We trust you, El."

Jonathan nodded his agreement, taking Elizabeth from his mother's outstretched arms and bringing her over to the bed. "Hold your arms out," he told El gently. She did so, and Nancy adjusted her form just a bit before he lowered the baby into her awaiting arms.

"Just support her head... there, that's great!" Nancy assured her, smiling widely as El slowly began to relax. "See? It's as easy as that."

Instead of looking down at Libby with apprehension like she was before, El now seemed just as lovestruck as the rest; she'd just had to get her bearings first. "She's so cute," she cooed. "Oh, and she's looking at me!"

The new parents grinned as El and Libby stared each other down, the latter sticking her small hand in her mouth and making small gurgling noises up at her aunt. Mike approached the bed and wrapped his arm around El's shoulders, smiling down at the pair of

them. "I guess Libby must like you then, huh?"

Nancy smirked. "Well, that's a good thing, considering you're her godparents," she revealed, feeling thoroughly pleased at the look of shock that spread across Mike's face. "And Will, you too! You and Mike are just gonna have to tag-team it."

The three of them stared at one another for a moment before El voiced her confusion. "Godparent?" she asked, her tone implying that she didn't know the term.

Jonathan nodded. "Yeah. It means that we trust you to take care of her if anything ever happens to us."

Upon seeing El's horrified expression, Nancy quickly jumped in to clarify. "I mean, that's only *if* something ever happened to us, which it probably won't," she assured her. "Apart from that, it basically just means we trust you to love her and be there for her as she grows up."

El let out a relieved breath. "Okay," she agreed, slowly nodding her head. "Of course I will."

The boys quickly nodded their agreement before they began to bicker over which of them should get to hold her next, but Hopper swooped in before either of them could react. El handed the baby over to her father gladly, playfully sticking her tongue out at Mike when he stared open-mouthed at her. "Traitor," he mumbled under his breath.

El giggled and shushed her boyfriend, but the majority of her attention was focused on her father cradling Libby. He looked so content, even with Joyce leaning over to point out who her different facial features belonged to. He just gazed down at her with a serene smile on his face, and she knew he was undoubtedly thinking of Sara, of the times when the baby he'd held was his own. It warmed her heart to see him at peace with his memories of her while he stared adoringly at his new granddaughter; not by blood, but still every bit his own. "Hey there, kiddo," he greeted her. "It's really good to meet you."

It wasn't long before he deigned to pass her over to her uncles, but El could tell that Libby had him wrapped around her little finger.

However, although she was excited to see more of her father becoming a softie, her attention followed the baby as she was handed over to Mike next.

"Hi, Libby!" he introduced himself. "I'm your Uncle Mike. I might not be around much, but when I am, I promise I'll be the coolest uncle ever! Your mom will probably never let me babysit because I'll just end up taking you out to go to the movies and get ice cream and things like that, but I guess we'll just have to figure that out later," he told her. "Regardless, your auntie El and I will find *some* way to spoil you even from a distance."

Will grinned as Mike passed their niece over to him. "I'm Will, Libby. And we'll *both* be cool uncles," he assured her. "But even though we won't be around all the time, it'll be okay because you've got the best parents ever. You're such a lucky kid!" he told her, nearly bringing tears to both Nancy and Jonathan's eyes. "But the rest of us are always going to be there for you too, no matter where we are, because we take care of our family. We protect one another," he explained. "Everyone was there to help me when I needed it, so now I'm gonna be there for you. You can count on me, count on all of us. We won't let you down."

After that, there wasn't a single dry eye in the room, but no one could argue with the sincerity of Will's promise. They all knew few families went through the amount of hardship and trauma that theirs had, but their experiences had ultimately brought them closer together and strengthened their bonds until they were unbreakable.

And although all of them fervently hoped that Libby would never know the horrors they did, her parents couldn't be more thankful that they were able to bring her into a family as loving and devoted as their own.

---

*Hope you enjoyed this chapter, everyone! I hope to have the next one up very soon.*

*However, I'll admit, I've been having a little bit of writer's block lately concerning... well, everything. So if you have any prompts, or suggestions for this story or any other Stranger Things-related fics, please drop a*

*comment and let me know! There's just not enough Jancy being posted lately, and I want to help keep my OTP alive and thriving :)*

## 9. Homecoming

"Jonathan, we're not going to break. You *can* drive the speed limit."

As her fiancé gently eased the car forward over another snow-covered pothole, Nancy couldn't help but laugh at him from the back where she sat beside their daughter's car seat. "Seriously, Jon, you're putting Libby to sleep back here with how slow you're going!"

Jonathan glanced at her in the rear view mirror with a sheepish expression. "Well... isn't that a good thing?" he countered, raising his brows inquisitively. "For a while there, I didn't think she was *ever* going to stop crying. You know, after she got her shots and everything?"

"Oh, don't remind me," she sighed, frowning at the memory from that morning. Once the pediatric nurse had walked in with the tray full of needles, Nancy had had to look away because she couldn't bear watching her daughter getting her immunizations. As a result, Jonathan had to be the one who'd held their daughter steady as she received each injection, and even though he'd tried his best to keep her calm, poor Libby had screamed for ages. That is, until the next time she became hungry and was ready to nurse. It seemed the only thing that had the power to calm her after such an experience was being fed. And afterwards, as Nancy was wheeled downstairs to where Jonathan had pulled up the car, she'd started crying *again* as a result of the cold air that had somehow managed to infiltrate her warm blanket cocoon.

But now that their baby girl was snoozing away, instantly lulled to sleep by the movement of the car, Nancy couldn't resist leaning down close to her so she could listen to her soft breathing. Close enough that she could even feel the small puffs of air against her face. It was just another lovely reminder that her daughter was truly with them, at last, and not curled inside of her like she was barely 24 hours ago. In fact, she became so lost in her reverie that she hardly noticed that Jonathan had parked the car. But when she finally turned her head, she found him looking back at her with a soft smile and an even softer look in his eyes.



She returned his affectionate gaze, her lips turning upward into a grin. "I know everyone's probably waiting for us inside," she acknowledged. "But I could honestly just sit here and stare at her forever."

"I know what you mean," he agreed. "When I got up to change her last night, I felt so tired. But I still ended up sitting there and holding her afterwards for... maybe a half hour?"

Nancy felt her heart go warm. "Did she fall back asleep in your arms?" she asked. When he nodded in reply, her smile grew even wider. "I love that feeling," she sighed happily. "Just knowing that she feels safe with us."

He nodded once again in agreement, laughing quietly. "At least we know we make good pillows," he joked, getting out of the driver's seat and making his way around to get Libby's carrier. As he opened the back door, Nancy undid the car seat's straps and zipped her daughter's little jacket up nice and tight so she wouldn't get cold before tucking in her baby blanket on either side, as well, for good measure. She let out a sigh of relief when Libby remained sound asleep, even as Jonathan picked up the carrier by its handle.

Switching her carrier into his right hand, he held out his left to help her up out of the car. She took it gratefully, trying her best to hide her wince as he pulled her to her feet, but he seemed to have noticed anyway. "How are you feeling?" he asked gently, wrapping his arm around her. "Still pretty sore?"

She nodded with a small sigh as they began to take small steps towards the entrance to their building. "She's worth it," she assured him, glancing lovingly down at Libby. "But yeah, I think this is probably gonna hurt for a little while."

Jonathan gave her a small, sympathetic smile and turned his head to plant a kiss on her brow. "You took it like a champ though," he told her. "I'm really proud of you."

Nancy grinned. "You may have mentioned that once or twice already yesterday," she giggled, playfully nudging her head against his shoulder.

He shrugged in response. "Doesn't make it any less true today, does it?"

His steady arm never left her waist as they continued slowly up to their apartment, allowing her to lean slightly against him as they walked. But after what felt like ages, they finally arrived back at their door. Jonathan dug his hand into his pocket for his key before remembering he'd given it to his mother and Hop, so he reached out to turn the knob instead, finding it unlocked. He pushed the door open with his shoulder since his hand was still holding Libby's carrier and held it open for Nancy to go inside.

However, once the door swung closed behind them, the two were shocked to find their apartment completely transformed from the moment they'd left it. Everything was *sparkling* clean, and a variety of pink balloons decorated the living area. There was also a medium-sized banner splayed across the window reading, "WELCOME, LIBBY!" which looked like Will's handiwork.

And although she'd been expecting their families to be there when they arrived, Nancy couldn't help but smirk when she heard the hushed whispers that suddenly came from behind the couch. "Wherever you all are hiding, just don't shout 'Surprise!'" Nancy chuckled. "She's sleeping."

Mike, Will, El, and Holly respected their wishes by not yelling, instead opting to stage whisper an excited "Surprise!" as they sprung from their hiding places around the room. The new parents both grinned at their soft yet enthusiastic greeting, but Nancy started full-on laughing when Karen and Joyce entered the room from the kitchen, closely followed by Hopper and Ted. Their mothers were brandishing a cake that must have been baked this morning, which read "Happy birthday, Elizabeth!" in curly, pink icing.

"You guys really didn't have to do all of this!" Nancy exclaimed, slowly stepping forward to hug both women once they'd set the cake down on the table.

They embraced her gently in return, obviously understanding how sore she still was. "Sweetheart, we wanted to," Karen insisted, kissing her forehead. "Trust me, for the next couple of weeks, you'll be glad

for all this."

"What, having a clean apartment?"

At that point, Holly stepped in to elaborate. "Mom's been in the kitchen making food for you all day!" she explained. "The fridge is full of casseroles so that neither of you will have to cook for a while!"

Mike tried to conceal his snickers behind his hand. "Or rather, *Jonathan* won't have to cook for a while," he snorted. "Sorry, Nance, but you're still pretty shit at it."

Although the corner of her lip twitched upward, threatening a smile, Nancy narrowed her eyes at him regardless. "I just gave birth, Mike. *I created life*," she deadpanned, gesturing towards her baby daughter. "So what if I'm not the world's greatest cook?"

Mike flashed her a shit-eating grin as he made his way over to give her a hug. "Oh, don't get worked up about it. You know I'm just messing with you," he teased her, gently patting her back in apology.

Holly took their embrace as an opportunity to intervene. "So... since Mikey's being mean to you, does that mean I get to hold Libby first today?" she pleaded, looking up at her sister with large doe eyes.

Nancy smiled at her sister over Mike's shoulder while Jonathan tried not to laugh at the youngest Wheeler child's manipulative techniques. "She's sleeping right now, Holls, but you can have her first when she wakes up."

However, the attention in the room shifted when Will gestured towards the carrier in Jonathan's hand. "That might be sooner than you think," he warned them.

Indeed, Libby had begun to squirm in her wrappings and soon let out a distressed cry when she couldn't get her arms free from the blanket wrapped around her. Jonathan set the carrier down on the kitchen table, and Nancy immediately reached out to retrieve their daughter. "Shh... it's okay. Mommy's here, sweetheart," she cooed before turning back to her sister. "You still want her, Holly?" she asked with a small smirk.

The younger girl wrinkled her nose with sudden distaste. "Maybe a little later," she acquiesced, traipsing back into the living area to watch a rerun of some old game show with her father. She didn't seem to care in the slightest when the rest of the room began to laugh in response to her exit.

---

Before the day was out, Libby had been passed around the room nearly a half-dozen times, Holly practically begging to hold her the minute she stopped crying, and Karen and Joyce had relayed a novel's worth of useful tips and tricks when it came to taking care of a newborn. They'd drilled their children on everything from quick diaper changes to different calming techniques, and although Nancy and Jonathan both loved their mothers more than words could possibly say, the relief was apparent on both of their faces when their families finally decided to return to their hotel for the night. They'd be back in the morning for a brief check-in and goodbye before heading back to Hawkins, but the night was theirs to spend alone with their daughter.

While Jonathan attempted to usher their well-meaning relatives down to their cars, Nancy sat on the loveseat in the living room, silently gazing down at the sleeping child in her arms. Libby appeared to be quite exhausted by the day's events, having been woken up multiple times throughout the afternoon as she was passed from relative to relative, but she now finally seemed to be in deep sleep.

Since she was no longer actively sucking on the pacifier that was stuck in her mouth, Nancy carefully removed it from between her lips, setting it on the table before turning back to her. She smiled as she watched her tiny eyelids move and wondered what on earth she could be dreaming about at only a day old... Did newborns dream? She figured they probably had to, but she made a mental note to skim through her stack of parenting books later to see if she could find out, for sure.

She became so lost in her wondering that she didn't hear the front door open and close as Jonathan returned to the apartment from outside, and she nearly jumped when she felt his hand fall lightly onto her shoulder. Thankfully, she was a little too tired to react

beyond a soft startle, so Libby remained fast asleep.

"Sorry!" he quickly apologized, bending over so he could press a kiss into her hair. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Nancy tilted her head back against the top of the couch so she could look up at him from her seated position. "It's okay. It's not your fault she's so cute and distracting," she laughed before flashing him a mischievous grin. "Well... I guess it is maybe a little bit your fault."

Jonathan responded with a quiet laugh of his own, circling around the couch to sit beside her. "Well, if we're distributing blame here, I'd say it's mostly *your* fault," he insisted, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "I mean, I think she looks more like you."

She shook her head, looking back down at their sleeping child. "Nuh-uh! She's got your mouth and nose, for sure," she protested. "And I can already tell she'll have your smile."

Jonathan smirked, but she could still see the joy lighting up his eyes. "Poor kid," he chuckled, gently brushing his fingers across her small curls, which were a shade of muddy blonde like his own hair.

Despite his self-deprecating humor, she couldn't help but grin. "Shut up!" she retaliated, drawing out another laugh when she lightly shoved him. "She's perfect."

"Yeah, she is," he agreed, his previous laughter fading into a soft smile as he stared down at her. "She really is."

They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, both of them more than content just to watch their daughter sleep. But eventually, as Jonathan adjusted his arm around her, Nancy's head slowly came to rest on his chest, her heavy eyelids beginning to droop with exhaustion.

Noting her weariness, he gently nudged her shoulder to rouse her a bit. "You ready to go to bed?" he asked. When Nancy nodded drowsily against him, he reached over and carefully took Libby from her arms, shifting her into his own. Luckily, she remained out like a light, so he held her in one arm so he could help Nancy up with the

other. He could tell just from the way she carried herself that she still felt both tired and extremely sore from the previous day.

Although he encouraged her to take her time, Nancy tried to shuffle her feet forward as quickly as she could as soon as she stood up. She was more than eager to get a couple hours of uninterrupted sleep before Libby woke up to nurse again. However, once they reached their bedroom (where Libby would also be sleeping for the first couple months), she simply couldn't bring herself to get into bed without turning her attention back to Libby one more time.

With a sleepy smile, she padded over to where Jonathan stood, watching as he bent over to lay Libby down in her crib. It was just so surreal, seeing it finally occupied after it had sat empty beside their bed for nearly a month, and it brought her so much more joy now than she ever could have expected before.

"Jonathan... we're parents," she whispered, still awestruck by the mere thought of it. "I still can't believe it."

She felt his arms wrap around her from behind. "Me neither," he agreed. "A year ago, I never would've thought we'd be here right now."

She nodded pensively. "Same here."

Jonathan absentmindedly played with her hair for a moment while he contemplated what to say, but he finally decided to voice the question that was running on-repeat through his head. "Are you happy?" he asked quietly. "With where we're at now?"

"Yes... I really am," She told him sincerely, trying not to focus on the wetness that was starting to gather in her eyes... Damn hormones. "We have her. We have each other. We made it out of Hawkins. We're getting married soon," she listed off, her smile widening. "I think... this may be the happiest I've ever been."

He grinned. "You have no idea how glad I am to hear you say that," he replied, leaning in to kiss her cheek. "Because I feel the same way."

Sniffling back the tears that threatened to escape, she turned around

in his arms and touched her lips briefly to his. "I love you, Jon," she said softly, wrapping her arms around his middle. "So much."

"I love you too," he whispered, resting his cheek on top of her head. "More than you'll ever know, Nance."

They held each other for a moment or two until she felt him lightly tugging her towards their bed, which was an invitation she was all too happy to accept. As they got underneath the covers, she reveled in the knowledge that he could finally hold her properly again now that she wasn't nine months pregnant. He immediately took advantage of this fact, gently wrapping his arms around her and pulling her back against his chest so they could both see Libby in her crib.

And as they fell asleep that night to the calming sound of their daughter's breathing, neither of them had ever felt more complete.

## 10. Nightmare in Dreamland

In their first couple weeks of parenthood, Nancy and Jonathan gradually slipped into a somewhat-steady schedule of feeding and changing and soothing, which often included one or both of them falling asleep at odd times whenever Libby went down for a nap. However, nighttime was undoubtedly the least routine period of their day. The only aspect of the evenings that had some semblance of order was the timing of Libby's nightly feedings, and that was just because her tiny stomach could only consume small amounts at a time, and so it had to be frequently refilled. However, between her feedings every three or four hours, it was always a mystery as to whether or not she would remain asleep until the next one. Occasionally, she would wake up due to her need to be changed, and other times, she would simply startle herself awake and need to be rocked back to sleep.

Suffice it to say, they were both *tired*.

*'Get your beauty sleep when you can, Nancy,'* the other women at the *Times* had told her while she was pregnant. *'Because it's going to become a thing of the past.'* And while she knew that they had learned from experience themselves, having raised their own newborns, she still wished they'd kindly shut up.

Nancy already knew about exhaustion, having spent countless nights in a row awake in the aftermath of the Demogorgon, as well as a few more after Will's exorcism (although Jonathan, for obvious reasons, suffered worse that time around). She knew what it was like to wake up every couple hours, her mind racing with the remnants of whatever terror had awoken her in the first place. So in all honesty, in comparison to the horrific nightmares she'd experienced, waking up to take care of Libby was like a walk in the park.

However, even considering her semi-optimistic view on things, some nights were still worse than others. These, of course, were the ones when Libby refused to be calmed by either one of her parents, regardless of how they doted on her. On those nights, no amount of rocking or bouncing could calm the infant, and Jonathan often had to resort to putting her in her car seat and driving around the block to



put her back to sleep. This could only serve as a temporary solution, however, seeing as he would have to return to work soon. They needed the money, and he couldn't afford to lose much more sleep if he wanted to stay awake on the job.

But somehow, by the grace of God, Nancy soon found Libby's Kryptonite.

The night had progressed differently than most others since it was one of the few when she *did* wake up as the result of a nightmare, the first she'd had since giving birth to her daughter. In many ways, it was the same as the ones she would typically have: Barb was screaming her name, Jonathan's hand slipped out of hers and failed to pull her out of the tree, the Mind Flayer somehow re-opened the gate, etc., etc. But now, there was the addition of her daughter's frantic crying echoing around the dark forest, as if she herself were trapped in the Upside Down. The very thought sent a chill down Nancy's spine as if her blood had suddenly turned to liquid nitrogen.

She sat bolt upright in bed, panting as if she had just run a great distance, and the sound of her rude awakening caused the baby to start stirring restlessly. However, when Nancy realized that Jonathan was still sound asleep beside her, she quickly swallowed back her tears and scooped her daughter into her arms, shutting the door and speed-walking to the nursery before Libby could start crying and wake him up.

Frankly, after what she had just seen, she was actually thankful that Jonathan had remained undisturbed. She felt like she needed this time alone with her daughter to gather her thoughts and calm the restless pounding of her heart within her chest. Jonathan, although just trying to offer his support, always tried to get her to talk about it, and she didn't want to revisit the thought of her infant daughter in danger.

With a shaky sigh, she collapsed into the old rocking chair that her mother had given them as Libby began to whimper, and her arms immediately started to move of their own volition. She bounced her daughter gently in an attempt to calm her down, but it appeared to be taking little to no effect as Libby continued to cry. It took her a few moments to come to her senses enough to realize she was still

shaking as a result of her dream, which couldn't be at all helpful in putting Libby back to sleep. And before she knew what she was doing, she suddenly found herself regressing back to a coping strategy she'd used in the year after the Demogorgon took Will.

She began quietly humming to herself to block out the memory of her nightmare, completely devoting her concentration to the familiar melody of *Over the Rainbow*. She'd seen 'The Wizard of Oz' countless times growing up (and was also chosen to play Dorothy in her elementary school's production), so she knew every word to the Judy Garland tune, and more often than not, it was *just* enough of a distraction to calm herself down in the aftermath of an anxious episode.

However, she'd become so invested in calming *herself* down that it took her a while to notice that Libby had gone quiet in her arms.

Nancy smiled, her nervousness fading away into the back of her mind as her daughter occupied her attention. "You like that song too, huh?" she whispered, stroking her finger along the baby's ruddy cheek. Her teary blue eyes were tired as they stared glassily up at her, but Nancy swore she could also see the beginnings of curiosity taking root in her gaze. So, when Libby started making a disgruntled sound in response to the silence, Nancy was unable to resist indulging her daughter's desire to hear her voice. With a soft breath in, she started to sing the all-too-familiar lyrics:

*"Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high; There's a land that I've heard of, once in a lullaby..."* She'd never really considered herself a particularly talented singer, but Libby seemed to hang on her every word, staring up at her intensely as if she had hung every star in the sky. *"Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue... and the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true."*

By the time she reached the part where happy little bluebirds fly, Libby was fast asleep with her head pillowed against her mother's chest. Nancy let out a content sigh, her heart no longer racing with the memories of the horrors she'd once faced. Now there was only her and her daughter, cuddled together in an old rocking chair while Jonathan slept soundly in the next room. For that moment, she felt safe again, like nothing could ever touch her or her family.

She knew the nightmares would come again... they always did. But with Libby curled delicately into her arms, she would be able to face them. She felt as if she could take on the world, like she could do *anything* for the sake of her child. She made her feel capable and strong, just like Jonathan did. 'Like father, like daughter,' she supposed, leaning down to press a kiss to the soft peach fuzz on her head.

For a fleeting minute or so, the perfection of that beautiful moment felt endless, as if she could sit here forever and be content watching her baby snoring in her arms. However, her head snapped up when she heard a sudden, loud gasping from the other room, accompanied by the squeak of rusty mattress springs as Jonathan shot up in bed. She sighed sadly; it would appear she wasn't the *only* one haunted by the past that night.

She stood to her feet and quickly made her way back to their bedroom where her fiancé was indeed sitting up in bed, his breathing heavy and frantic-sounding. His eyes were wide with terror, as if they were still looking out for a monster that had appeared in his living room years ago, and she couldn't distinguish between what moisture on his face was cold sweat and what was the salty residue left by tears.

She carefully sat herself down beside him, ready to provide whatever comfort he needed, but that question was quickly answered for her as he pulled her and Libby into his arms, holding them tightly against his chest (though not tight enough to hurt the baby) as if he were afraid they might fade into nothingness.

"It was here. The gate opened again, but it was *here*," he said in a gravelly voice, his wet face buried in Nancy's neck. "And when I woke up and you two were gone... for a split second, I thought—I thought that—"

"Shhh..." she cut him off. "It's okay, we're here. We're here, and we're *safe*," she assured him, running her fingers soothingly through the bedraggled mess of his hair. "It was a nightmare, Jon... just a nightmare. I had one tonight, too."

That seemed to get his attention. "You did?" he asked, lifting his head

so he could meet her gaze. "Why didn't you wake me up?" he questioned her, lifting his hand to wipe at his face.

"Trust me, I would have if I'd known you were having one too," she told him, reaching up to touch his cheek. "But Libby woke up when I did, so we went and rocked for a little bit."

He let out a small hum of acknowledgement. "I'm glad you're okay," he replied, turning his head to kiss the scar in the palm of her left hand before turning his attention to the infant in her other arm. "And it sounds like you had some pretty good company."

"The best," Nancy chuckled, a soft smirk snaking across her lips as she held the baby out to him. "Want a turn?"

Desperate for the peace of mind only holding his daughter could provide, he nodded and gently took Libby into his arms. The transfer between them seemed to rouse her from her slumber, but rather than crying like she tended to do when she woke up in her crib, she seemed quite content with being held. She simply made tired grunting noises up at her father and curled her tiny fingers into the fabric of his t-shirt as she yawned.

Jonathan smiled lovingly down at her, letting out a quiet laugh in response to her sleepy sounds, and lifted her up so he could kiss her soft cheek. "I'm sorry we keep waking you up tonight, sweetheart," he apologized. "I know it must be very frustrating for you."

Nancy laughed. "She gets to sleep whenever she wants! She'll tough it out," she rationalized. "Besides... I figured out how to get her to fall back asleep."

Jonathan smirked, raising a curious eyebrow at her while he bounced Libby gently up and down. "Okay, I'm intrigued," he admitted. "Care to demonstrate?"

She grinned, taking Libby from his arms and pressing her hand on his chest. "Lay down then," she told him. "It might just work on you, too."

He'd never looked more confused, but with a shrug of his shoulders, he complied and let her push him back down onto the mattress. Once

he was stretched out on his back, she delicately laid Libby on his chest, and while he brought a hand up to steady her on top of him, Nancy laid on her side so she could face them both before she began to sing.

Just as she'd hoped, her lullaby technique worked just as well as it had the first time, Libby's eyelids immediately beginning to droop. As she started to doze off, she cozily nuzzled her way even closer to Jonathan's warmth, her small hand still seizing tiny fistfuls of his shirt until she relaxed completely, her jaw going slack with sleep.

Although Jonathan had let out a yawn here and there through the course of the song, he remained awake nonetheless and was now looking towards Nancy with a ridiculous amount of love in his eyes. He hesitated for a moment, opening his mouth without knowing what to say, before settling on the simplest and most prominent thought in his head. "You're so good with her," he whispered with a soft smile. "I mean, um, I always knew you would be, but... you're just a *really* great mom, Nance."

That meant more to her than she could sum up in words, so she leaned over to kiss him instead. She figured that her gesture could probably speak for itself, but she murmured a quiet, "I love you," against his lips anyway, which he promptly returned before they separated.

They laid together in quiet bliss for a minute or so, Nancy's head propped against his shoulder beside their sleeping daughter, before Jonathan's quiet voice disrupted the silence. "So, if you get to be Dorothy again... does that make me the scarecrow, the tin man, or the lion?"

Nancy had to clap a hand over her mouth to restrain herself from bursting into raucous giggles and waking Libby up a third time. "If I remember correctly," she said once she had regained her composure. "You were one of the stupid trees that got to throw fake apples at me."

Jonathan grinned fondly at the distant memory. "Oh yeah..." he recalled. "You know, now that I think about it... that was actually sort of fun."

He considered himself lucky right then that their daughter was sleeping on him since Nancy probably would've hit him otherwise. "Hmph... you're a jerk."

He laughed, pressing a playful kiss to her forehead when she glared at him. "I love you too, Nance."

"Shut up before I drop a house on you."

---

*Remember to leave a comment on your way out, folks. I love feedback!*

*Feel free to let me know what you thought of this chapter or suggest future scenes you'd like to see. Or both! Both is good :)*

## 11. Splish Splash

*Hello everyone! I'm sorry I haven't updated in an age or two, but like I've said before, college definitely pulls me away from writing quite a bit. But the semester's almost over and I'll be getting my Bachelor's degree in a couple of weeks, so that's something! And then I'll have all summer to devote more time to this fic. Anyway, enjoy the absurd amount of fluff in this chapter!*

---

Although Nancy and Jonathan had both had the shared experience of being older siblings, the latter had been a bit too young to recall most of his little brother's newborn days. Similarly, Nancy recalled very little of when Mike was an infant since their age difference was the same as the Byers brothers, but since there had been a significant gap between herself and her younger sister, she could remember much more of Holly's babyhood. Being twelve years old at the time, she had been capable enough to help her mother with the various duties that came along with her newborn sister, and she was now intensely grateful for having that experience since she was now a mother herself.

So when the remainder of Libby's umbilical cord fell off as she entered her third week of life, Nancy felt much less reluctant than Jonathan when it came to giving her her first real bath.

"It's really not as hard as you might think," she encouraged him. He was holding her protectively against his chest while she simultaneously filled a little plastic tub with warm water from the bathroom sink. "Besides, now that the rest of her cord is gone, we can't just give her sponge baths anymore. She *needs* this."

Jonathan rolled his eyes, a small smirk threatening to appear on his face. "I'm not *opposed* to bathing her, Nance," he replied, a touch of playful sarcasm in his voice. "I've just never done this before..."

"You really never helped your mom give Will a bath?" she asked.

"I mean, sure, but not until he could sit up and support his own head by himself," he told her. "I was *three*!"

Nancy laughed, grinning down at their baby daughter in his arms. "She'll be fine," she insisted. "Honestly, all we really have to worry about is whether or not she'll like it."

When she had been young, Holly was *not* a fan of bath time, and this was why Karen had so often recruited her oldest child's assistance in getting her clean. The youngest Wheeler child would do everything in her power to resist being bathed; she'd cry and scream like a banshee and thrash around so that it was nearly impossible to apply soap or shampoo without getting it in her eyes, which only made her more irritable as a result. Needless to say, both Nancy and her mother usually ended up just as wet as Holly was by the end of each ordeal.

However, Nancy had found multiple resources that claimed some babies took much better to the water than others, and she fervently hoped that this would be the case with her own daughter. If she was just as opposed to it as Holly had been, she knew it would be *extremely* difficult for either her or Jonathan to bathe her singlehandedly in the future, and once they both were back at work and taking care of her at different times, they wouldn't always be able to make bath time a two-person operation.

After the tub was filled up to about three inches with bathwater, she shut off the faucet and turned to her materials lying on the counter: a couple of soft washcloths, tear-free baby shampoo, some towels, and a set of warm pajamas to dress Libby in afterwards. She picked up one of the towels and submerged it in the bath so that it laid across the bottom of the tiny tub; this way, Libby wouldn't be in any danger of sliding around on the slippery plastic surface. Once she was satisfied, she turned on her heel to face Jonathan and Libby. "All set?"

He gave her a small, nervous smile. "Do you want to do the honors or should I?"

Nancy laughed. "You go ahead and get her ready, then I'll put her in."

Sadly, neither of them were very surprised when Libby began to whimper as Jonathan undid her pale yellow onesie. One of the things they'd learned very quickly about their daughter was that she hated being cold above all else. Therefore, she was a very snuggly baby, and although she loved being held in general, she preferred to be



cuddled up close and personal. Nothing soothed her quicker than being in close proximity of her parents' natural warmth. However, this also meant that she loathed being undressed for any reason other than skin-to-skin time, and she was very vocal about her distaste for nakedness whenever she was put into a new outfit or having her diaper changed.

To both her parents' dismay, this time seemed to be no different as she dissolved into full-bodied sobs, big fat tears starting to roll down her face as more and more of her tiny body was exposed to the air. Nancy frowned and reached forward to stroke her daughter's cheek, brushing some of the moisture away. "I know, I know," she whispered. "You don't like that, do you?"

Jonathan had to resist the strong urge to pull her closer and warm her up with his own body heat rather than trusting the bath to comfort her, but he knew she had to go in the water sooner or later. So with a short kiss on her forehead, he reluctantly handed the newly naked baby over to Nancy. "It's okay, Libby," he quietly murmured in an attempt to soothe her, but she seemed to be beyond consoling.

That is, until Nancy gently placed her in the tub.

At first, the baby seemed more confused than anything else, her teary eyes widening as she came in contact with the water, and even though her neck wasn't quite strong enough to fully support her head, her gaze swiveled around a bit as she tried to figure out her current predicament. She experimentally pumped one of her tiny legs, causing the water to ripple around her body, but she didn't seem entirely displeased by it. On the contrary, she actually began to calm down rather quickly as she grew accustomed to the new sensation.

Nancy grinned at her daughter's reaction and started to rub a washcloth across her tummy. "See? Easy!"

Jonathan couldn't help but smirk. "To be *fair*..." he rationalized. "You had no idea whether or not she'd like it either."

"Yes, but I wasn't the one pacing a hole in the floor beforehand," she teased him, briefly leaning up to kiss his cheek.

"I was not—!"

"Just pick up a washcloth, Jonathan!"

He rolled his eyes and pretended to glare in response to her shit-eating grin, her tongue poking playfully out from between her teeth. "Don't make me splash you, Nancy."

"What... Like this?"

He barely had time to react before she grabbed another wet cloth and whipped it at him, soaking both his face and a large section of his t-shirt. His jaw dropped as Nancy giggled, continuing to wash the wide-eyed baby as if nothing had happened. He brushed his now damp hair out of his eyes before picking up a washcloth of his own. It wasn't wet yet, but he gestured menacingly with it towards Nancy's face. "Try that one more time, Wheeler, and you'll be sorry!"

At that point, she burst out laughing, letting her forehead fall onto his shoulder (the one that still happened to be dry). "I'm sorry, I *had* to!" she insisted, looking back up at him with an apologetic pout. "I'll be good now."

He tried to keep a straight face in response but failed miserably when he began to grin. "I'll hold you to that," he promised her with a quiet laugh of his own.

From there on out, Libby was suitably content with her parents cleaning her; in fact, it almost looked like she was *enjoying* herself. Realistically, both of them knew it was still way too early for her to give them a genuine smile, but Nancy still could have sworn she saw a brief hint of one as Jonathan delicately lathered shampoo into her scalp. "That feels nice, doesn't it, sweetheart?" she cooed, gently tickling her daughter's foot.

Once they'd scrubbed all over Libby's body and rinsed the soap out of her hair, Nancy started to grab a towel to pick her up with, but Jonathan reached out a hand and took it from her grasp. "I can get her," he insisted, the joking glare returning to his eyes. "I mean... I'm already wet *anyway*."

She lifted her hand to her mouth to stifle her laughter as she nodded her agreement. But even in the midst of her mirth, she couldn't deny the warm fuzzy feeling that radiated within her chest at the sight of Jonathan wrapping their daughter up like a little baby burrito. He lifted her up and cradled her against his shoulder, pressing a kiss to the side of her head. "What did you think of that, Libby?" he asked, gently bouncing with her out of habit. "That wasn't so bad, huh?"

Nancy continued to giggle behind her hand as he towed off their baby girl, her tiny curls standing up in soft, fluffy tufts as they dried. Part of her was tempted to take a comb to it, but it was also the most adorable thing she'd ever seen, so she figured she'd leave it for the time being... or at least until Jonathan had a chance to take a picture. And once she was dry enough to be dressed again, Jonathan diapered her while Nancy grabbed hold of the purple PJ set she'd chosen, pulling it onto Libby's body afterwards.

"Oh, Libby, look how squeaky clean you are!" she exclaimed, lifting her up into her arms. "It's a good thing Daddy finally gave in, or you'd still be a little stinky, wouldn't you?"

Jonathan narrowed his eyes as she continued to make fun of him. "I never—" he began to say, but he stopped midsentence as he thought of a much more satisfying way of getting back at her. He let his gaze wander to the other side of the bathroom, behind where Nancy was standing. "Um, Nance... what's that in the shower?" he asked. "It sorta looks like mold."

Just as he knew she would, Nancy quickly went on high alert, immediately handing Libby over to him so that she could go inspect their own full-size bathtub. "Oh no no no, we *cannot* have mold right now. She could breathe it in, or *we* could, for that matter, and we can't have anyone getting sick right now—" she rambled off as she stepped into the tub. "I don't see anything, Jon. Where'd you say it was?"

"There, back in the corner," he insisted, trying to keep the smirk off his face as she delved further inside. While she was distracted, he took a brief peek at her clothes to see if any of them would be ruined if they got wet. And upon realizing it was just a cotton t-shirt and sweatpants anyway, he grinned mischievously as he turned the

shower on and pulled the curtain closed.

He heard her shocked gasp as the cold spray rained down on her, and he could see her fumbling through the curtain to turn the faucet off. Before she could find it, however, he'd already darted out of the room with Libby in hand, giggling madly as Nancy began to shout at him.

"Jonathan Byers, you are a *DEAD MAN*!"

He couldn't help it; revenge was sweet.

---

*As always, please leave your comments letting me know what you thought and what you'd like to see in upcoming chapters! It really does mean the world to me to hear from you all :)*

## 12. M Is For Mastitis

Nancy had heard of the "baby blues."

Throughout her extensive pre-Libby research sessions, she'd read about all of the various risk factors that could lead to bouts of tearfulness and self-doubt in new mothers, as well as in the more severe cases of post-partum depression. Since she was the type to prepare for the worst, she'd acknowledged that there would probably be times within these first few weeks where she'd feel sad, unsure of herself, or just generally lethargic.

But she'd *never* expected to feel like as much of a failure as she did now.

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure I'm understanding this..." she stammered, feeling utterly foolish in front of the pediatrician who was performing her daughter's 1-month checkup. "She's *dehydrated*?!"

"She is showing *mild* symptoms, yes," Dr. Taslin informed her. "Typically, by this time, we would expect to see a bit more weight gain, and at this point, she should be sleeping at longer intervals as well."

"But how...? I've been—" Nancy stuttered, trying to match the movement of her lips to the thought spirals running through her head. "I nurse her every three to four hours! That's *normal*, isn't it?"

Dr. Taslin nodded his head. "Yes, it's not her *schedule* that seems to be the problem, Ms. Wheeler. It seems to me like she's simply not getting enough milk when you're nursing her," he explained. "I know this is your first child, and breastfeeding is something that requires a fair amount of practice, so I'd assume she's probably not latching properly."

Nancy opened her mouth to respond but found that she had no words to accurately express the feeling of dread that was swirling in her stomach.

Seemingly having recognized her reaction as a familiar one, the

pediatrician gave her a practiced smile that seemed to lie halfway between pity and understanding; it did nothing to calm the torrential emotions now beginning to brew within the new mother.

He carefully picked Libby up from the paper-covered examination table and took her over to a nearby chair where a nurse had prepared a bottle of formula. "This is seven ounces," he told her, holding the bottle up for her to see before coaxing the nipple into Libby's mouth. "This is how much she should be getting during each feed, regardless of whether she's getting formula or breast milk."

"I-I've only been nursing her," Nancy quickly explained. Although it was the less convenient and generally unfashionable option, he'd read that breastfeeding was crucial for bonding and that breast milk tended to accelerate infants' cognitive development, as well as the physical. After learning about all these benefits that it provided, her ultimate decision had felt simple at the time...

So it made her a little uneasy to see Libby drinking the bottle of formula with such fervor. Her brow was furrowed and her nose wrinkled, which led Nancy to assume that she wasn't a fan of the taste, but at the rate she was drinking it anyway... she *must* have been hungry.

The pediatrician nodded his head as he fed her. "Breastfed babies *do* often tend to gain weight a bit slower, but due to the circumstances, I would still advise you to keep some formula on hand from now on, just in case," he suggested. "But if you do plan to continue her diet with only your own milk, you might consider trying some new techniques so that she always gets her fill."

Nancy nodded dazedly, hardly able to believe what she was hearing. She'd been malnourishing her baby for *a month* without even knowing it.

Before their appointment was through, Dr. Taslin had sent her to consult with a lactation specialist, who became immediately concerned when Nancy let out a small gasp of pain when Libby latched on. "Is it normally this uncomfortable when you're nursing?"

Nancy looked up from her baby with a confused expression. "It's not

supposed to...?"

Just to add insult to injury, the woman quickly examined Nancy and told her that the pain she was experiencing was due to mastitis. "It's an infection in your breast that typically results from improper latching or having an inconsistent feeding schedule," she explained, gesturing down to where Libby was suckling.

Nancy felt like every ounce of confidence that she'd had when she arrived was slowly being drained from her. "But... we *are* consistent."

"I'm sure you are!" the woman assured her. "You may just have to try some different methods in the future to make sure she's getting the majority of what you're producing. When milk is produced but not used up, that's what tends to cause the infection," she explained. "We'll prescribe you some antibiotics to help clear things up, but other than that, just try to continue nursing as often as possible to relieve any uncomfortable pressure you might experience. You may have to start utilizing a breast pump in the future, as well."

With her insides suddenly feeling very heavy, Nancy offered an unenthused "thank you" and made her way out of the clinic with Libby bundled up in her carrier. When she reached her car, she quickly buckled her daughter in before climbing into the driver's seat, where she sat for a minute or two staring blankly through the windshield.

She wanted to cry... She *needed* to cry. Better yet, she wanted to scream and curse and possibly punch something to blow off steam. But with Libby dozing off in her car seat, she didn't want to risk upsetting her. So she clenched her jaw a little too tightly and began the uneventful drive back home.

When Jonathan arrived back at their apartment, he could tell almost immediately that something was out of the ordinary. Usually, when he returned from work, Nancy could be found playing with Libby in the living area or relaxing by herself if their daughter was taking a nap. However, neither of them were to be found when he crossed the threshold into their home that day.

"Nance?" he called, dropping his bag by the entrance. "Are you

home?" He knew that she had been going to take Libby to the doctor for a check-up, but he figured that they would've returned a while ago. Where was she?

When he received no response, he delved deeper inward, stopping first at their bedroom. The door was left open, and although Nancy was nowhere to be found, Libby was napping peacefully in her crib. His brain quickly put two and two together, and he began to look for another open door; she would've left them both open so that she could hear Libby when she woke.

Eventually, he approached the bathroom upon seeing that the door was slightly ajar, but a cold fist gripped his heart when he heard soft sobs emanating from within. He didn't want to startle her, so he lightly tapped his knuckles twice on the wood to alert her to his presence. "Nancy?"

He slowly pushed the door open a little wider, but his heart immediately began to ache in response to the sight before him.

His fiancée was curled in the bathtub, wearing a thin tank top and panties, and her eyes were red and swollen as tears cascaded down her ruddy face. She was wet, but her chest was especially soaked, almost as if she'd dumped handfuls of bathwater on her breast without having cleaned the rest of her.

But the thing that stuck out to him most was that her gaze was eerily vacant, staring glassily ahead as she sniffled and cried. It seemed like she hadn't even noticed him enter... or she was purposefully not acknowledging him.

He had no clue where to start, but he knelt down beside the tub and rested his hand lightly on her arm. "Hey... what's going on?" he asked softly, trying not to let his feelings of anxiety seep into the tone of his voice. "Are you okay?"

Nancy squeezed her eyes closed and bit down hard on her bottom lip, trying not to cry any more than she already was. She remained silent, unable to form words past the sobs that threatened to emerge from her. But after a few seconds, she weakly shook her head. There was no point in trying to hide her pain from him; he already knew.



She was expecting an onslaught of questions from him: 'Why are you in the bathtub?' 'Is Libby alright?' 'What exactly happened?'

But rather than *hearing* a response out of him, she felt one. She still had her eyes tightly shut, but she could feel him climbing into the tub behind her and sinking down so that his legs were sprawled around either side of her. The thin top she was wearing was soaked, but he didn't seem to care in the slightest as he pulled her closer, gently cradling her shivering form against his chest.

And that's when she broke down completely. She curled herself into a pitiful ball, pulling her knees to her chest and swiveling around so that she could bury her face in his shirt as she bawled. Even now, she didn't want him to see her face; she knew she had to look like a pathetic mess in that moment. So she kept herself tucked against him and simply allowed herself to let go, trying to concentrate on his solid presence beside her rather than the wetness of the tears flooding her eyes. Based on both of those sensations, she knew she was probably ruining his nice work shirt, but she couldn't bring herself to stop once she had started.

He didn't say a single word, at first. He just let her cry, figuring that she probably needed this release. He simply rocked her back and forth instead, holding her tightly against him as if she was the only other person in existence, but unbeknownst to her, he was using this time to try and imagine what could have possibly upset her this much.

However, his silent musings were interrupted when Nancy let out a sharp yelp of pain, jolting away from him when he adjusted his arms around her. "Nancy, what's wrong?" he asked, his eyes filled with worry. "Are you hurt?"

She had to gulp back another sob before she could even *try* to speak, and her subsequent attempt at it was pretty unsuccessful anyway. "I-I'm okay," she stuttered. "I mean, I—I have an... an infection, b-but it —"

"Wait, what?" he interjected, reaching out so he could feel her forehead with the back of his hand; she did seem to be running a slight fever. "Where? What infection?"

"M-mastitis," she stammered, tears coming to her eyes again. "It's in m-my chest, and it's... it's all my fault," she whimpered. "I-I thought I was do—doing a good job with her, Jonathan. But I'm not... I'm not as d-decent of a... of a mom as I thought I was."

He furrowed his brow with confusion. "Nancy, what are you talking about?" he softly questioned. "You're a great mom. And why does this even have anything to do with that?"

She knew she'd just start bawling her eyes out again if she explained it to him herself, so she reached out her hand for the book she'd used to look up the definition and symptoms of Mastitis. It was sitting just out of reach on top of the closed toilet seat, and when her arm didn't extend far enough, Jonathan reached out on his own and grabbed it, immediately flipping to the section she had recently dog-eared. As he started to scan through the page, she lowered her head back onto his chest, but rather than letting herself cry some more, she started trying to regulate her breathing. He was bound to have questions, and she wanted to be able to answer them without bursting into tears, however unlikely that seemed in the current moment.

She listened to the calming sound of his heartbeat under her ear until she heard his voice. "Is it hurting a lot?"

Even though she didn't want him worrying about her, she knew he'd see right through a lie if she tried to deceive him. So she simply nodded her head without going into further detail.

He sighed, resting his chin against the top of her head. "I'm sorry," he whispered, gently hugging her in a way that wouldn't put pressure on the area that was causing her pain. "Is there anything I can do? You know... to help with that?"

Her eyes began to grow wet again at his offer. He was so kind, so compassionate, so good to her even though she'd spent the last month being a horrible mother to their baby girl. "No... but even if there was, this is my own fault anyway," she hiccupped. "I-I deserve this."

"Nance..."

"He said she was *dehydrated*, Jonathan!" she exclaimed. "I read all

those books and did so much research, but I was still too inept to realize she wasn't *growing* enough," she berated herself, her voice growing more hysterical by the minute. "You should have seen the way she drank the formula he gave her. They say most breastfed babies will barely even *take* formula because they don't like it, but she was *starving!*"

"Nancy, you need to calm down..."

"*I can't!*" she wailed. She was already starting to hyperventilate and the added pressure on her lungs was only irritating the infection in her chest even more. She let out a cry that was only partly due to the pain in her breasts and started to curl in on herself again. "I'm horrible at this," she keened, holding her face in her hands. "I'm not cut out to be a... a mom!"

Jonathan could feel his heart practically splitting in half at her words, but at that moment, he was less concerned with her insecurities about motherhood and more worried about the accelerated rate at which she was breathing. He hadn't seen her have a full-blown anxiety attack since they were dealing with the aftermath of paranormal events in their high school days, and as a result, he could feel himself starting to panic a little bit along with her as her gasps grew quicker and shallower.

But for her sake, he took a deep breath himself and held it together, pulling her so that her back was flush against his chest. "Nancy, listen to me," he ordered, trying to keep his voice gentle, but at the same time, firm enough that she would actually pay attention to him. "I need you to breathe with me, okay?" he instructed. "I know you're upset, but we'll figure everything else out later. For now, I just need you to breathe."

"I-I *can't!*"

"Yes, you *can*," he insisted, placing his hand on her stomach and holding her up against his own. "We're gonna get through this together, alright? Just listen to my voice," he whispered in her ear. "Now breathe in..." he encouraged her, pulling in a slow, deep breath. "And out..." he finished, releasing the air steadily through his lips so she could feel him blowing against her cheek.

"J-Jon, I—I *can't*..."

"Don't say that. Don't say anything right now," he ordered. "Just breathe in... now breathe out..." he continued. "In... and out..."

He continued to repeat that mantra until he could finally feel Nancy's middle rising and falling in time with his. Her inhalations were a little shaky and occasionally stuttered a bit, but it calmed him to know that she was no longer at risk of passing out in his arms. He let out another breath, this one utterly relieved as he craned his neck and pressed a kiss into her hair. "You're okay..." he said soothingly. "Everything's gonna be okay."

"How can you say that?" she rasped, her voice strained in the aftermath of her anxious episode. "Jonathan, I'm—"

"*Amazing*," he interrupted her, tilting her head gently back so she was looking up at his face. "Nancy, you are *nothing short of amazing*," he stressed, his own voice starting to grow thick with emotion. It truly hurt him to see her like this. "We're both new at this, so there were always bound to be some hard times, but even considering how unexpected this was at first, you've handled everything *so well*," he emphasized. "You've been so steady and so brave, and I'm *so proud* of you. Honestly, Nancy, after you gave birth... that was *the happiest* moment of my life, and I don't think I'll ever be able to thank you enough for giving us our daughter," he told her, tears threatening to well up in his eyes as he recalled the day they first met their beautiful newborn.

Nancy's eyes were still shimmering with tears, which ran down her face as she blinked up at him. "I just... I just want to be good enough for her. I *need* to be."

"You're *more* than good enough," he assured her. "Libby adores you; you may not see it, Nancy, but she does," he told her in a straightforward voice. "She never falls asleep easier than when she's in your arms or when you're singing to her. She hardly ever fusses when you wake her up for a feed. She always pays attention when you play with her," he rambled off, the list in his head growing steadily longer as he spoke. "And as for how much she's eating, she's nowhere near starving. Maybe she's not growing as fast as most

babies, but neither did Will, and he was fine. We'll just have to figure out a way to make sure she gains more weight from now on," he rationalized. "And from what that book said, this seems like it's a pretty common thing, Nancy. You're not alone, and you're *far* from being a bad mom."

He felt her breath hitch as she tried to snuffle back her tears, and he couldn't resist leaning down to kiss some of them away, letting his forehead rest against hers afterwards. "She loves you so much, Nance... we both do."

"I love you too," she whispered. She lifted her arms and let her hands rest lightly around the back of his neck, holding him close, and he wrapped his arms around her waist in return, his hand tracing soothing patterns on her hipbone.

They sat holding one another in comfortable silence until they began to lose track of time. Eventually, they were interrupted by the sound of Libby's crying emanating from their bedroom, and Jonathan could feel Nancy's body go tense in his arms, her muscles contracting with nervousness. "It's gonna be okay," he assured her once again as he stood to his feet and stepped out of the tub, offering his hand out to her. For a moment, she simply stared at it, as if contemplating whether or not she had the strength to stand, but after taking a couple of deep breaths to steady herself, she allowed him to pull her to her feet.

They made their way to the bedroom where their daughter was now awake and longing for their attention, but as they began to approach her crib, Jonathan silently held back while Nancy peered over the side. He knew Libby enjoyed seeing either of them, but he wanted Nancy to see for herself that their daughter could be comforted by her mother's presence alone.

Indeed, as soon as she saw Nancy, Libby's cries immediately halved in volume, and through the bars of her crib, Jonathan could see her waving her arms with uncoordinated movements, practically begging to be picked up. Nancy quickly wiped some of the remaining wetness from her face before reaching down to lift the baby into her arms. "Hi, sweetie," she greeted her with a small smile. "It's okay, Libby. Mommy's here."

Once she was cradled against her mother, she immediately began to calm down ('as per usual,' Jonathan noted). Her cries slowly faded into small snuffles as she burrowed against Nancy's warmth, and as she made herself comfortable, Jonathan couldn't help but grin when Nancy made a noise halfway between a laugh and a sob. But regardless of what it was, it sounded *happy*. And as long as his girls were happy, so was he.

They were going to be okay.

### 13. Smile for the Camera

Nancy loved Jonathan's passion for photography. She loved watching him work and seeing his eyes light up when he captured the right moment, immortalizing it on the roll of film housed within his camera. She loved it when he developed his pictures for work and brought them home to show her. She loved that *he loved* his craft.

But she felt like she'd never truly *understood* his internal motivation to document the world around him until Libby was born.

Before their daughter came along, she'd always preferred to let him to take the pictures while she focused on living in the moment, and if *his* version of doing just that included documenting how they spent their time together, then so be it; she loved him for it. However, although it was definitely a nice perk to have pictures that chronicled their relationship, she always thought she'd be content with simply her memories if those photos were somehow lost to them.

But now that Libby seemed to be growing before their eyes each day, she felt the drive that she assumed he already experienced with each fleeting opportunity that passed them by. As a result, they'd taken enough pictures between them both to fill a small album, even though the baby was barely two months old. No moment seemed inconsequential anymore, whether it was her grasping at their fingers or sticking out her tongue or just looking especially cozy in her little winter coat. Everything suddenly seemed worth capturing.

However, as Nancy exited the shower early one afternoon, she found the tables suddenly turned on her.

Despite it being only March, one of her summer dresses was hung over the edge of the bathroom door, which she had left just slightly ajar so that the room didn't get too steamy; she was still having pesky hot and cold flashes while her body continued to recover from pregnancy.

Wrapping her towel around herself, she stepped out across the tile and found a small note pinned to the skirt, written in the tidy scrawl she knew to be Jonathan's handwriting:

*This is just one option out of many (I think you look beautiful in anything), but put on something that makes you feel good. Mother/daughter photo shoot to follow afterwards!*

Although it also probably had a lot to do with her hot shower, a warm and happy blush arose in her cheeks upon reading what he had written. To tell the honest truth, she hadn't been feeling entirely back to her normal self since the incident at Libby's one-month check-up, and although she knew they'd both been doing better (with her infection clearing up fairly quickly and Libby starting to gain weight again), she'd confided in Jonathan the previous day about how she had still been feeling a little down. However, in the moment, they'd been interrupted by Libby waking up from a nap, so this was now undoubtedly his own little way of trying to cheer her up.

Eager to see what else he had up his sleeve, she quickly towed off her hair before pulling the garment on over her head. Of course, he'd known that this dress, a flowing violet one that she'd worn to his mother's wedding, was one of her favorites to wear when it was warm out. However, she was actually quite glad she had an excuse to wear it now, despite the fact that there were still occasional flurries of snow outside. Even if her body wasn't exactly the same as it was the last time she'd worn it, she adored it anyways, along with the happy memories it brought her of sunshine and dancing.

Suddenly feeling much more energized than she was earlier that morning, she decided to apply a touch of makeup, as well. Even if it was just some mascara and a bit of sheer pink lip gloss, she wanted to appear confident since Jonathan was already going the extra mile to make her feel better. Pleased by the small accomplishment, she glanced at her reflection in the mirror and threw her hair into a quick updo before making her way down the hallway towards the living area of their apartment.

She grinned when she saw Jonathan kneeling on the carpet, his face already hidden behind his camera, with their daughter laid out upon a soft play mat on the floor. The mat, which had been a gift sent from Lucas and Max at UCLA, came complete with an overhanging arch that had a variety of soft celestial-themed toys attached to it, and Jonathan was trying to attract the baby girl's attention to one of the planets dangling above her head.



"Look up here, Libby!" he said to her, his voice a little higher than usual. Even he was not immune to the influence of "cutesy baby talk," as Holly had so aptly called it. In an attempt to get her to focus upward, he reached forward and nudged Jupiter with his hand so that it swung back and forth tantalizingly across her visual field.

However, when the baby's eyes began to cross as they followed the toy, Nancy couldn't hold back her laughter, immediately revealing her presence to her fiancé. He turned his head from the viewfinder to face her with a grin. "Hey!"

"Hey yourself," she greeted him, sitting down on the floor beside him. She was about two seconds away from kissing him silly, but she hesitated and became distracted when Libby started to squirm upon hearing the sound of her voice. The infant seemed to be vastly more excited by her mother's presence than by the toys hanging above her head.

Nancy grinned down at her, her heart feeling light within her chest. Libby hadn't smiled for them quite yet, but for the time being, wiggling around seemed to be her own way of displaying her enthusiasm, especially whenever she or Jonathan entered a room.

"And hello to you too!" she cooed down at her daughter, reaching down to pull her into her arms. The infant made a contented noise in response to being picked up, and Nancy felt as if she could melt at how sweet it was. "How are you, sweetheart?"

Jonathan smiled, setting his camera aside. "A lot happier now that you're done with your shower, it seems."

Nancy grinned, her tongue poking out mischievously from between her teeth. "Are you speaking for you or for her?"

"Does it matter?" he replied playfully, leaning forward to kiss the bridge of her nose. "It should go without saying for both of us."

Her heart immediately began to swell at his words. She cradled Libby a little tighter against her chest so that she could scoot closer to him, and his arm extended out to her almost automatically so that she could settle into his side. She laid her head on his shoulder and was

silent for a minute or so, simply taking the time to soak in his warmth.

Although they spent much of every day together, excluding the mornings and afternoons that Jonathan spent transitioning back into work, Nancy felt like she rarely had the chance to just *be* with him anymore. Although she knew it was probably normal for many new parents, they were both so hyperfocused on Libby and her needs that their ability to spend quality time together had become somewhat compromised, and Nancy figured this was one of the reasons she'd felt off lately, in addition to her bout of mastitis. Before Libby, spending time with Jonathan was just her norm, and although they were still together all the time, it was just a new sort of dynamic to get accustomed to while they were caring for a newborn.

But at that moment, she was starting to feel a little more *whole* again.

Jonathan seemed to pick up on her thoughts fairly quickly, leaning his head on top of hers. "How are you doing?" he asked, rubbing his hand comfortingly against her shoulder.

"Better," she assured him quietly. "A lot better than I have been anyway."

She felt his smile against her hair before he turned to kiss her forehead. "Good," he replied. "Did the shower help at all?"

She let out a small, involuntary laugh. "Well... yes," she admitted. "I guess it did."

"You guess?"

"Yeah. I mean, being clean is one thing, and don't get me wrong, it really *does* help," she admitted. "But I feel much better just... being here," she told him. "With you."

His lips stretched into another genuine smile. "I'm glad," he replied, leaning his forehead gently against hers. He took a moment to wrap his free arm that wasn't around Nancy's back around Libby so that he could hold both members of his little family in his arms.

"Nance..." he began to say, taking a second to figure out how he

wanted to phrase what was in his head. "I know things have been changing pretty fast. And even though they're *good* changes, I know it's still hard to figure out sometimes," he acknowledged. "I'm kinda still learning how to manage it all."

"I know," she agreed softly. "So am I."

He nodded. "But we *are* learning," he reminded her. "And it may not always be easy... but we're going to get through this."

She nodded back her agreement, lifting her gaze upward to face him. "I know we will," she replied. "We've gotten through everything together."

"That's right," he said with a smile, leaning forward to press a short kiss to her lips.

Nancy responded with much greater enthusiasm than he'd initially expected, but he was more than happy to oblige as she carefully shuffled herself into his lap, still cradling Libby in her arms. Even after their lips had parted, he wrapped his arms around her and held them there securely, gently rocking them back and forth without even realizing he was doing it.

"Thanks... I needed that," Nancy's quiet voice responded after a few seconds.

"Yeah, of course," he replied with a soft laugh, tucking her head delicately under his chin. "You know I'm always gonna be here for you, Nancy. But you just need to tell me when you're feeling burnt out, okay?"

She nodded her head against his chest. "I'll try," she agreed.

"Good."

They sat in content silence for a little longer, Jonathan playing absentmindedly with Nancy's hair while they both stared down at Libby. Neither of them could contain their grins when she began to coo nonsensically up at them, waving her tiny hand up towards her mother's nearby face. Nancy had read in various baby books that responding to an infant's babbles was a good way to encourage them

to practice vocalizing, so she began talking enthusiastically back down to her.

"Wow, Libby, that's so interesting," she murmured softly in reply, prompting a chuckle from Jonathan. "Can you tell me more?"

Libby paused for a couple seconds, as if expecting her mother to continue speaking, but eventually she resumed making her gibberish sounds. If they hadn't already been seated on the floor, her cute conversational attempts probably could have brought both her parents to their knees, but their smiles were wide and genuine as they listened to her.

However, neither of them were expecting her to smile back.

It came seemingly out of nowhere. They'd lightly poked her tummy and tickled her feet and under her chin in the past couple months, but up until now, they hadn't gotten much of a reaction out of her apart from her eyes widening in surprise. But when Nancy's hand floated down, letting her fingers dance across Libby's middle, a toothless grin blossomed across her face, accompanied by a happy-sounding gurgle.

Both of their jaws dropped, and a delighted laugh escaped Nancy as she lifted her baby up to cuddle her closer. "Oh, Libby, your first real smile!" she exclaimed, tears of joy pricking the backs of her eyes. "I'm so happy you're happy."

"Of course she is," Jonathan agreed, stroking his fingers lightly across his daughter's curls. "She's got the best mommy in the world, after all."

At his words, a couple rogue tears finally managed to break through her resolve, falling onto the carpet below. "Don't forget about the best daddy in the world," she reminded him, turning her neck so she could kiss his cheek. "She must have known you wanted to take pictures of us today."

Jonathan grinned. "Speaking of which..." he transitioned, reaching out to reclaim his camera. "Smile!"

Holding it up to his face, he shifted around a bit until he found an angle from behind Nancy's shoulder that captured Libby's precious expression as well as his fiancée's side profile. Then, having waited patiently until the moment was perfect, he couldn't be more satisfied when he finally snapped a photo of mother and daughter gazing at one another, twin smiles emblazoned on both of their faces.

Even before seeing it developed, he knew that picture would be going in his wallet and staying there forever.

---

*Oh my goodness, I'm sorry it's taken so long for me to update. I've had a HELL of a case of writer's block lately, but I'm hoping to be inspired for future chapters by your comments! \*wink wink nudge nudge\**

*...No, seriously though, PLEASE let me know what you want to see in future chapters! I'm writing this for you guys as well as for my own enjoyment, so give me some direction on where you'd like this ship to sail :)*